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By Jordan A Horvath

Entitled

Cultural Readings of Ojibwe Novelists

For the degree of Master of Arts

Is approved by the final examining committee:

Christian Knoeller

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4/3/2015

Date

CULTURAL READINGS OF OJIBWE NOVELISTS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Purdue University

by

Jordan A Horvath

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Arts

May 2015

Purdue University

West Lafayette, Indiana

For my family.

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ABSTRACT

Horvath, Jordan A. M.A., Purdue University, May 2015. Cultural Readings of Ojibwe Novels. Major Professor: Christian Knoeller.

This thesis examines the work of three Ojibwe novelists through the cultural lens of primarily Ojibwe literary and cultural critics. Novels by Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and David Treuer are analyzed with the intent of highlighting aspects of the work in which a heightened understanding of Ojibwe cultural and literary practices, both historical and contemporary, may elevate a reader's engagement with the texts. In the analyzing of these texts, precedence is given to the work of Ojibwe critics such as Vizenor and Anton Treuer. This prioritization of Ojibwe literary theory and cultural knowledge will demonstrate that readers, particularly non-Ojibwe readers, benefit in their experiences reading Ojibwe novels when they engage also with the historical and cultural background which informs the novels. This thesis concludes with a comparison of a cultural reading of David Treuer's novel *Little* with a psychoanalytic reading. The purpose of this comparison is to illustrate the different conclusions readers with and without a basic grounding in the culture of the Ojibwe may come to when analyzing the same culturally relevant aspects of the same novel.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“But it is not enough to listen to or to read or to understand the truths contained in stories; according to the elders the truths must be lived out and become part of the being of a person. The search for truth and wisdom ought to lead to fulfillment of man and woman.” Basil Johnston, *Ojibwe Heritage* 7.

There are more officially recognized Ojibwe people in North America than there are members of any other Indian nation considered separately¹. It is thus surprising that there exists such a dearth of critical studies by the people of the Ojibwe Nation as compared with the relatively high output of such work by members of other Native nations such as the Cherokee. This is not to suggest that there has been an absence of Ojibwe voices in the critical discussion. Many, a few of whom I shall “introduce” shortly, have produced works of such impact that they have reached beyond a limited application of study of the Ojibwe only and have affected the trajectory of Native studies and literary studies.

The scope and depth of so much of this work by Ojibwe critics is so impressive, indeed, that more than once I found myself asking what I, a non-Ojibwe student of the culture and its literary outputs, could possibly add to the existent body of work attempting to view the work of Ojibwe people through a specifically Ojibwe lens. The fact of the matter is that, as a non-Ojibwe person, there are limits to what I can contribute

¹“We [the Ojibwe] are the most populous tribe in North America, though not the most populous in the United States. That would be the Cherokee” (Treuer, *Rez* 7).

to a discussion of Ojibwe customs and traditions. I have tried, throughout what follows, to be sensitive to my own limitations. One of the ways I have tried to exercise this sensitivity is by relying almost exclusively on Ojibwe sources in my discussion. I have stayed away from non-Ojibwe accounts of Ojibwe history, customs, and the like in an attempt to give as much space as possible to those best qualified to speak about these aspects of Ojibwe life: Ojibwe peoples themselves.

Another way I have tried to be as sensitive as possible to my limitations as a non-Ojibwe person has been by paying particular attention to the terminology I employ when speaking about the Ojibwe and other Native peoples. My understanding of the delicate relationship between Native peoples and the non-Native people who like to write about them has been greatly enhanced and nuanced over the course of my writing by the Ojibwe critics I have read and who have shaped so much of this project. As Anton Treuer notes in *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but were Afraid to Ask*, the various words that have been used to refer to native peoples “are often ambiguous, equally problematic, and in some cases...cumbersome” (7). Treuer continues on to clarify what is a generally accepted truism among all Native people today when he notes that, if one is struggling to settle upon a term, “we should all use tribal terms of self-reference in writing about each tribe: they are authentic and loaded with empowered meaning” (8). Thus, I have used the terms Ojibwe and Anishinaabe when referring specifically to the peoples once erroneously identified as the Chippewa. Largely, I have stuck with “Ojibwe” rather than “Anishinaabe” because, as Treuer points out, “Ojibwe people today use the term *Ojibwe* as a tribally specific term for self-reference (Ojibwe only) but also use *Anishinaabe* to refer to all Indians” (10).

I have used the word “Native” in place of Anishinaabe to avoid confusion when I am referring to indigenous peoples generally. This is because some Ojibwe, such as Gerald Vizenor in his earlier works, use Anishinaabe to refer exclusively to Ojibwe people. I have settled on *Native* rather than using the terms *Indians* or *indigenous peoples* because *Native* is less fraught, generally speaking, than the term *Indian* and it is less of a mouthful than *indigenous peoples*. Ultimately, while many of the Ojibwe authors and critics I cite are comfortable with the use of *Indian* as a catchall category, I have decided to stay away from such a reclamation of the word given my non-Native status. Thus, without any further ado, I shall briefly introduce these critics to provide a sense of the scope of my theoretical framework.

Gerald Vizenor (White Earth Ojibwe), who also produces excellent novels, poetry, and essays on the application of constitutional law to indigenous nations, is responsible for a great deal of the currently existent body of theoretical/academic responses to Native literature, broadly considered. His writing has had a profound impact on the development of critical work pertaining to Native studies because, throughout his many publications, Vizenor has argued for an entirely new framework, survivance, through which to view Native literature and other aspects of Native culture. I have drawn heavily in what follows on his critical work, particularly his title essay in *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. This anthology, edited by Vizenor, collects responses to Native literature; Vizenor's crowning theory of survivance serves as an inspiration for many of these essays which have been written by some of the most respected names in Native literary studies. His creation of and extensive elaboration upon the term “survivance” as a lens through which to view Native life and literature has been pivotal not only for my own small

project here but for the growth and expansion of Native studies and, I would surmise, for many people, individual and communal lives. A. LaVonne Brown Rouff aptly and succinctly summarizes the significance of Vizenor's work, literary and critical, when, in an early precis of Vizenor's published work up through 1986, she writes, "Vizenor deals with the cultural conflicts between the white and tribal world both through the dramatization of the plight of real and imagined Indians and through satiric treatment of genuine issues" (21).

Vizenor's early career also included an impressive array of publications aimed at bringing into public view, for the first time as often as not, texts revealing aspects of traditional Ojibwe life including traditional customs, mythologies, and historical understandings. These texts, such as *Summer in the Spring*, in which Vizenor "interprets" traditional poems and reproduces ancient pictographs from the Ojibwe, and *Visions of the Chippewa*, which anthologizes stories from an older generation of Ojibwe, have also been key, I would argue, in opening up Ojibwe history and culture to audiences both general and academic, Ojibwe and non-Ojibwe alike. In an extended interview with Hartwig Isernhagen, Vizenor himself comments on the singularity of his attempts to bring (sometimes by force) the traditional world into contact with the contemporary world. "I make critical use of just about everything I can find that's been written about the Anishinaabe. I don't always put it into my work, but when it's in contradiction, I do, or if it embraces, I do. I don't know of anyone who makes as much use even in fiction of actual ethnographic and historical documents" (88). It is also worth noting that Vizenor's willingness to participate in serious interviews, such as this one with Isernhagen, which

runs around 60 pages in printed form, make him an invaluable Ojibwe resource on methods of interpretation of Ojibwe literature.

Anton Treuer (Leech Lake), though less prolific (and, to be fair, a tad bit younger) than Vizenor, is also a valuable source, particularly for non-Ojibwe readers. Treuer is the patiently helpful author of the book *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians But Were Afraid to Ask*, which is, as the title suggests, equal parts tongue-in-cheek frustration at the seeming lack of information about Native lives and issues available to the average individual of non-Native background, earnest desire to educate those who are also in earnest, and urge to pointedly and sometimes argumentatively clarify and address issues which have plagued and continue to plague Natives and their communities. For example, Treuer covers the contentious question, “how should Native peoples be referred to?” (*Everything* 7-11) as well as tackling questions such as how Indians are taxed and, perhaps more importantly, why they are thusly taxed (128-29). In addition to this helpful reference, Treuer has, like Vizenor, worked for the preservation and publication of Ojibwe voices other than his own as a means of representing the nation in a critical and enduring manner. Sometimes, this work takes the form of efforts toward language preservation such as his published dictionaries of Ojibwemowin words and phrases. Other times, Treuer's efforts toward cultural preservation and continuation takes the form of works such as his anthology *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories* which is published with the original Ojibwemowin versions of the stories facing the English translations. This particular anthology, which I will discuss and draw from at more length later on, is an example of the success of Treuer's methodology in feeding both Ojibwe and non-Ojibwe curiosity and passion for Ojibwe lives and stories.

Anton Treuer's brother David Treuer (also Leech Lake) has also established himself in Native scholarship, though his reception has been markedly more controversial, at least within the world of Native studies. Primarily a novelist, David Treuer made a controversial foray into literary criticism in 2005 with the publication in the *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* of "Smartberries: Interpreting Erdrich's Love Medicine." This article was later adapted for conclusion in the ironically titled collection of essays, *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*. These two texts, the article and the book, received much negative backlash for the harsh treatment they contain of Ojibwe novelist Louise Erdrich and Laguna Pueblo novelist and poet Leslie Marmon Silko. I shall have more to say about this controversy later on, but for now suffice it to say that whatever one's feelings about the quality of the work itself, the appearance of *Native American Fiction* is note-worthy as it is the only such work, other than Vizenor's, written by an Ojibwe which treats, *at length*, the literature of Ojibwe authors. As I mentioned in my opening paragraph, there is a serious comparative dearth of such works within the realm of Ojibwe literature compared with what is available in relation to other Native nations and communities of comparable size. Even Treuer's detractors, correct as they may often be, cannot ignore the critical importance of Treuer's contribution to the rectification of this lacunae.

More beloved, perhaps, than David Treuer is the famous Basil Johnston (Parry Island), likely the most widely recognizable name among Ojibwe authors. Johnston, born in 1929, wrote, amongst other things, a short but intensely educational book called *Ojibwe Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway* which compiles traditional Ojibwe history, mythologies, poetry, and other

aspects of the culture. Johnston's work is careful and in depth as he translates for contemporary audiences the belief systems of his people, making the Ojibwe world view accessible for modern day Ojibwe and also for outsiders. Like Anton Treuer, Johnston also worked toward making Ojibwemowin education available through instructional texts and dictionaries in addition to his efforts at publicizing the presence of continued Ojibwe existence. Some of his other publications, such as *Indian School Days* combine the two projects in a very readable, often comic though equally tragic, memoir of his childhood and the time he spent in an off-reservation boarding school which was much like the infamous Carlisle boarding school for Native children and adolescents. Johnston's work has been of great interest and value to me throughout this project because it is with him that the voices of Ojibwes speaking and writing about themselves as a people began. Johnston was groundbreaking in the creation of a history of written, publicly accessible texts in which the Ojibwe were able to define and redefine themselves as individuals, as agents of their own identities, and as communities.

In the work of Johnston and the other cultural critics discussed above, as well as in the works of fiction by the primary three Ojibwe authors whom I have chosen to focus on here, many of the same key issues can be seen appearing again and again and again. One of these issues concerns what it means to be Ojibwe. Whenever any sort of study is done which purports to be about a particular racial or ethnic group (or about any specifically specified topic which must impose often arbitrary restrictions on its limits such as period studies, regional studies, gender studies, and so on), there is always this question of how best to define that group and of how to defend that definition. When speaking of Native groups, or even of "Nateness" conceived of broadly, such questions

are particularly difficult, however, due to the tangled history of non-Native involvement in the application of answers, often by force or manipulation, to these questions. Such answers, supplied by non-Native people, have typically tended not to jibe with answers that individual Native people and their nations or tribes would give, but have often influenced further decisions made by Native people about inclusion under the heading of Native. Each of the three authors I will study here approaches this complex but vitally important issue in different ways, using the medium of fiction to formulate a set of answers, subjective and fluent, combining the undeniable burden of history with fervent hope for the future, to the questions of what it means to identify as Ojibwe and what has happened, will happen, and can happen as a result of that identification.

I have chosen three novelists, Louise Erdrich, Gerald Vizenor, and David Treuer, to focus on for a few reasons. First, I believe readers are more likely to be familiar with these authors than with other Ojibwe novelists and poets because of the commercial success they have received, particularly Erdrich and Treuer. Most recently, Erdrich won the National Book Award for her wonderful novel *The Round House* which tells the story of a young boy who seeks to avenge his mother's rape after jurisdiction issues bring legal proceedings to an inexorable crawl. Many of her other novels have received widespread positive reviews, high sales, and in-depth critical attention. Similarly, Treuer's novels, as well as his book *Rez Life: An Indian's Journey Through Reservation Life*, have garnered high sales and numerous glowing reviews, though his reception within the community of Native literature scholars has been a bit less than positive, likely in large part due to his antagonistic comments against other Native writers and critics. Vizenor's work, though less popular among non-academic readers, possibly due to his novels' more obvious and

adamant adherence to postmodern literary techniques, has been well received and much studied by academic readers and critics. Because of their critical and commercial success, the novels of Erdrich, Vizenor, and Treuer have seemed to be best suited for this kind of study of Ojibwe literature.

Louise Erdrich, author of over twenty works of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, has won numerous awards for her work. Some of her published work, such as *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, blend memoir and natural history to explicitly explore what it means to be Ojibwe, but, as Erdrich is primarily a novelist, the majority of her work explores this issue with much more subtlety. The first of her novels which I shall focus on is *The Painted Drum*; I will use this text to explore the ways in which Erdrich incorporates cultural history with an elegant portrayal of contemporary Ojibwe life. This juxtaposition of the traditional with the modern which so marks nearly all of Erdrich's writing does, I will conclude, expose an implicit argument which extends throughout Erdrich's oeuvre. What Erdrich illuminates in her fiction, I will argue, is that the "progress" regarding "the Indian question" which is so often touted by adherents to the early modern America party line (essentially, that assimilation into white America would be the best thing for the Native population as a whole)—this march toward "progress" has been a tremendous bust despite its small "successes" along the way, and what shall serve to nourish and protect the spirits of contemporary Ojibwe people is now, as it has always been, the inclusion of the traditional alongside the customs of contemporary life.

After my examination of *The Painted Drum*, I shall look next at two more of Erdrich's novels: *The Birchbark House* and *The Antelope Wife*. Through these two novels, I will examine the traditions surrounding Ojibwe beliefs about the power of individual

names. Because *The Birchbark House* is a historical novel intended for young readers and *The Antelope Wife* is a novel for adults which crosses back and forth through various historical periods and the present, these two novels are especially well suited for use in a comparison of how traditional Ojibwe and contemporary Ojibwe are treated in Erdrich's work. The conclusion I shall draw at the end of this section will be, simply, that these two novels serve as an illustration of my above point about the importance—crucial for contemporary Ojibwe readers—of remembering and practicing lessons passed down from traditional Ojibwe societies.

I will, following my discussion of Erdrich, move to a discussion of Vizenor's literary work, specifically his novels. Many of the topics I will discuss vis-à-vis Vizenor overlap with the topics discussed during my treatment of Erdrich. For the sake of simplicity and maximum clarity, I have chosen to organize my discussions by author rather than by themes and issues. This organizational scheme will also, I hope, help to emphasize the differences between the authors' works while I draw attention to various similarities. Gerald Vizenor subscribes less to Erdrich's realism and relies heavily on irony, re-appropriation, and subversion of the party line in his novels to illustrate his theories of survivance, manifest manners, the literature of dominance, postindians, and natural reason. All of these theories, which combine to formulate a vision of what it means to resist the imposition upon oneself of an identity not chosen for or by oneself, are meant to serve Natives broadly, but the Natives in his novels tend to be specifically Ojibwe (or, to use the term he prefers, Anishinaabe). In what follows, I will examine the ways in which Vizenor uses his theorizing to frame the plots of his novels and the ways in which he uses Ojibwe-specific details to color all that lies within this conceptual

framework. I hope to demonstrate how Vizenor uses his cultural identity, and, often, his own ancestral history, to provide numerous examples for readers of how his more abstract theorizing could possibly play out in the real world, outside of the realms of fiction.

To do this, I will first compare the ways in which survivance is defined and demonstrated in two of Vizenor's novels: *Chair of Tears* and *Father Meme*. I have chosen these two texts in the same way that I chose which texts by Erdrich to bring into my discussion: I chose them because I like them, because I believe that they are exemplars of the extensive literary oeuvre Vizenor has created over the decades, and because they are accessible literary accounts of that which I wish to highlight about contemporary Ojibwe literature. Both novels treat the theory of survivance rather differently, though they come to abstractly similar conclusions about the significance of being able to achieve survivance rather than languoring in a state of victimry or absence. If one were forced to summarize in a sentence the “moral” of Vizenor's novels, it would be thus: the paths to survivance are many, and whether you become, as the characters in *Father Meme* do, righteous murders of pederastic clergymen, or whether you instead devote your graduate studies to the collection of stray visions to guide your way as do characters in *Chair of Tears*, through the focused appreciation of the history, cultural relics, and institutional machinations which frame your identity, you can indeed do more than survive: you can resist, create, and, ultimately, achieve survivance.

Next, as I studied the use of names and nicknames in the work of Erdrich, I will do so in Vizenor as a point of comparison between the two “big names” in Ojibwe literature today. Character names are often examined, in Western literature, for whatever symbolic import they may possess, but parallel readings of names in Native works are

complicated by the invocations of different languages and symbolic systems. I am choosing to focus in on how Erdrich and Vizenor, and, eventually, Treuer, too, employ naming in their novels because, particularly for the Ojibwe, the interpretation of names is vital because of the particular importance of names within this culture. Also for the Ojibwe in particular, the interpretation of names is further complicated by the unique process of assigning names among traditional Ojibwe. Vizenor is much more explicit within the novels themselves about why certain names are chosen, the role they play both within the texts in which they appear and within the larger context of a re-imagined future for Native and Ojibwe people. I will examine the significance of the difference in usage of names between Vizenor and Erdrich, concluding that while Erdrich uses the role of naming in her novels to highlight the continued importance of traditional securities against the encroachment of those who would do harm, Vizenor plays with names as a more active method of resistance.

Finally, I will look briefly at the work of David Treuer. As I mentioned above in my introduction of Treuer as literary critic, Treuer is a much more controversial figure than either Erdrich or Vizenor, yet his novels and his combination memoir/history work, *Rez Life*, have been critically well received, and his impact on how the Ojibwe are represented in literature is commensurate with the influence of Erdrich and Vizenor. In my discussion of him, I will compare the ways in which he tackles the question of what it means to be Ojibwe with the ways in which Erdrich and Vizenor do.

Through my readings of select novels by Erdrich, Vizenor, and Treuer, I hope to establish that the time is ripe and the need is great for readers to learn to perform cultural readings of Ojibwe literature. Cultural readings do not exclude the value of other sorts of

interpretations, but, rather, cultural readings add to other interpretations and enable them to achieve a greater richness and an expanded relevancy to life off the page. Craig Womack in his important book *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*, which I shall discuss in much greater detail very shortly, makes great strides in arguing for and demonstrating cultural readings within the framework of Creek literature, culture, and theory. Now, the work to be done is to extend Womack's project to other segments of Native literature. What follows is my small contribution to such an extension to the work of Ojibwe novelists.

CHAPTER 2. LOUISE ERDRICH

Tradition and *The Painted Drum*

In this section, I will argue for Erdrich's inclusion in a specifically Native canon by doing a Womackian cultural reading of *The Painted Drum* (2005), *The Antelope Wife* (revised edition, 2012), and *The Birchbark House* (1999). What I mean by a “Womackian cultural reading,” and my reasons for choosing to approach my analysis through this framework, will become clear momentarily. First, though, I would like to briefly introduce the novels I have chosen to focus on in my ensuing discussion of Erdrich’s work. I have chosen to deal primarily with *The Painted Drum*, *The Antelope Wife*, and *The Birchbark House*, rather than any of Erdrich's more “popular” novels (such as *Love Medicine* or *The Round House*) for two (possibly related) reasons. First, there is less criticism already existent in relation to these three novels which allows me to easily justify adding a bit more fodder to the discussion. Second, at least two of the three novels (*The Birchbark House* and *The Painted Drum*) are, *prima facie*, simpler to discuss than, say, the novels which compose the *Love Medicine* tetralogy². This relative structural simplicity will, I hope, make it a tad easier for me to more clearly attempt a Womackian

²To underline the complexity of these novels, it is unclear if tetralogy is even the correct descriptor of the set of novels which include, with varying levels of involvement, the narratives of the Pillager, Kapshaw, Nanapush, and Lamartine families first introduced in *Love Medicine*. Characters from one or multiple of these families appear in nearly every single one of Erdrich's adult novels, including *The Antelope Wife* and *The Painted Drum*. Except where pertinent, I will be disregarding the character connections between novels in order to keep my discussion maximally clear.

cultural reading of the these two texts in order to demonstrate the particular aspects of Erdrich's work which seem to require a specifically Ojibwe lens in order for these novels to be opened up and understood as specifically Native literature.

Before beginning my discussion of Erdrich's work proper, it will be helpful to first provide a brief description of what it is that Craig Womack, a Canadian Creek and Cherokee critic and novelist, is proposing in his groundbreaking work of literary criticism *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism*. I will also provide a brief explanation of my intentions in taking this text, explicitly grounded within the Creek tradition, and apply it to readings of Ojibwe texts which I hope to hereby formally explicate within the Ojibwe tradition. Essentially, I am going to be borrowing rather heavily from Womack's methodology which, as Michelle Henry points out in her article "Canonizing Craig Womack: Finding Native Literature's Place in Indian Country," can only be understood in full by a simultaneous reading of Womack's theory with his fiction (32)³. Erdrich's work can be and has been discussed through a plethora of lenses, many of which do not engage at all or to a significant extent with the function of Ojibwe cultural signs within or adjacent to the text itself. Like Womack, who is careful to declare as much in his own work, I do not aim to fault or devalue such critical work. Rather, I hope merely to add a method of engaging with Erdrich's oeuvre which might highlight the connections between Ojibwe life and the stories this one particular author has to tell about it.

In the introduction to *Red on Red*, Womack butts up against postmodernist arguments, which claim that "no pure...viewpoint exists" (5), and asserts the need and the

³While Erdrich tends to stray away from theorizing her own work or the work of others, this aspect of Womack's methodology will greatly inform my reading of Vizenor in the next section.

significance of reading Native literature using only (or at least mostly) Native theory and criticism to shade one's reading experiences. "Native viewpoints are necessary," he writes, "because the 'mental means of production' in regards to analyzing Indian cultures have been owned, almost exclusively, by non-Indians" (5). The benefits of prioritizing Native discourse surrounding Native literary narratives are, broken down to their most basic, two-fold. First, doing so aids in the retention and expansion of Native sovereignty and autonomy, aspects of Native life which are still crucial to the livelihood of indigenous peoples across North America. In Womack's words, "Whatever one might argue about postmodern representation, there is the legal reality of tribal sovereignty...that affects the everyday lives of individuals and tribal nations and, therefore, has something to do with tribal literature as well" (6). As I will discuss in greater detail further on in this section, the stories we tell about ourselves as individuals and also as members of larger communities shape the way in which we realize the functions of ourselves and our communities, and they shape the futures we are able to envision rising from the pasts with which such stories are often concerned. There is an interconnectedness between material rights and experiences and the stories we tell to establish and contextualize those rights and experiences.

A key component of nationhood is a people's idea of themselves, their imaginings of who they are. The ongoing expression of a tribal voice, through imagination, language, and literature, contributes to keeping sovereignty alive in the citizens of a nation and gives sovereignty a meaning that is defined within the tribe rather than by external sources (14).

The second major benefit of prioritizing Native theory and criticism in discussion of Native texts is that doing so puts a check on the motivations and consequences which

arise when Native voices are shut out or in some way diminished. Cheryl Savageau, an Abenaki poet, observes that “it is just now, when we are starting to tell our stories that suddenly there is no truth. It’s a big cop out as far as I’m concerned, a real political move by the mainstream to protect itself from the stories that Native people...are telling” (qtd 3). Savageau is reacting to concerns that postmodernist theories of relativism will lead to a de-prioritizing of Native commentaries on Native works, a concern shared by Womack when he writes that “it is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven’t yet constructed it” (3). Premature or not, scholars such as the Ojibwe novelist and academic Gerald Vizenor do attempt to deconstruct Native history, but they do so always with an eye to the privileged status of Native peoples to shine light on the events and traditions being deconstructed. It is this privileging that is key, however: without it, we (and by we I mean all persons invested in the value of Native literature for whatever reason) lose a significant route into understanding the fact that “literatures bear...relationship to communities, both writing communities and the community of the primary culture, from which they originate” (4). In other words, insomuch as we value literature for the light it is able to shine on the lives we live outside of the stories, we need to ensure that the light shone by those lives is reflected back upon our interpretations of those stories.

This project of cultural interpretation, briefly outlined above, ought not to be confused with an anthropological stance which has been, rightly I believe, denigrated by a variety of Native and non-Native scholars as paternalistic, imperialistic, and just generally contrary to the value of great literature. I will make no claims to “discovery” of the “truth” of what it means to be Anishinaabe or Native. To the contrary, the claims I

make will be small at best and will concern only the light that can be shed on the internal workings of individual novels when Ojibwe culture and history are brought to bear on our readings of those novels. In *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, US-Canadian-Cherokee author and critic Thomas King observes that “the magic of Native literature—as with other literatures—is not the themes of the stories—identity, isolation, loss, ceremony, community, maturation, home—it is the way meaning is refracted by cosmology, the way understanding is shaped by cultural paradigms” (112). It is this notion of cultural paradigms as they exist and are imagined within Ojibwe societies that I wish to explore and apply, when helpful, to Ojibwe literature.

One such complicated yet significant cultural paradigm-turned-literary trope is the oral storytelling tradition. Those who engage with Native literature—critics and general readers alike—seem to so enjoy discussion of oral storytelling that the obsession is often lampooned even by Native authors such as Sherman Alexie (see, for example, *Smoke Signals*). Authors and critics such as Womack thus shoulder a, perhaps unfair, burden to reassert the relevancy and respect due to such traditions within our contemporary context. While authors continue to utilize these traditions in their work, whether to comic effect as Alexie often does, or with more serious intentions as Erdrich does, it is important that readers learn to recognize and navigate the historical and cultural backgrounds behind the traditions.

In *Red on Red*, Womack writes that, for Creeks, the “oral tradition articulated concepts of nationhood and politics” (51) and was a method of interpretation of the difficult to understand in both spiritual and secular matters, a method of interpretation which helped to bridge the gap between these two seemingly disparate epistemologies

(52-53). King, quoted above, writes that it is “the territory of Native oral literature” (114) to speak to “an ethic [of survival] that can be seen in the decisions and actions of a community” (113). He goes on to clarify that this is also “the territory of contemporary Native written literature. The difference is this: instead of waiting for you to come to us, as we have in the past, written literature has allowed us to come to you” (114). Like Womack, King sees stories, in whatever form they are taking at the moment under consideration, as a space to explore unrealized possibilities and to make sense of complicated realities. Also like Womack, King is careful to emphasize the specialized stakes at play in relation to the long-oppressed Native communities whose stories were so long relegated to the fringes of “mainstream” society while being such a central part of the communities creating and utilizing the stories. It is thus easy to understand why any person invested in the role of narrative in society (ie any student or scholar of literature) can quickly become invested in the role of oral storytelling in Native fiction: the two realms overlap greatly.

Louise Erdrich's novels in particular seem to lend themselves to readings which focus on the ways in which oral narratives can be reflected on the page in subversive reproductions of traditional Native stories. In her exploration of the ways in which *Tracks*, an early and integral part of the *Love Medicine* series, engages with the horrific and traumatizing history of Native peoples, Nancy Peterson argues that “because traditional written history represents a kind of discursive violence for Native Americans, *Tracks* emphasizes oral history....[signaling] the need for indigenous peoples to tell their own stories and their own histories” (24). This “shows...that telling the history of Anishinabe dispossession can paradoxically make it possible to narrate a history of Anishinabe

survival and cultural continuance” (35). Peterson's reading of *Tracks* thus identifies those same aspects of oral storytelling given special attention by Womack and King above and by other Native critics elsewhere: storytelling is a way of navigating and laying claim to that which cannot be accepted as a mere listing of facts, that which is too messy and convoluted to be truly understood as anything but a negotiable narrative.

Oral storytelling appears more explicitly in *The Painted Drum* as a stabilizing constant which connects the two halves of the novel's plot. *The Painted Drum* tells of the events which ensue when an antiques dealer, Faye Travers, makes the accidental discovery of a sacred cedar drum in the home of two recently deceased descendants of an Indian Agent. Faye steals the drum from the deceased's relatives before attempting to return it to its rightful owners, members of the Ojibwe nation in the Midwest. In the process of returning the drum, Faye and her mother meet a man named Bernard Shaawano who, throughout the second section of the novel, relates the history of the drum in the form of a story in which his own relatives play a central role in the creation of the story and the Pillager family, distant relatives of Faye through her mother's line, play a central role in its temporary retirement, a retirement which led to its finding its way to New England and into Faye's hands.

Relatively little has been written on *The Painted Drum*; Jean Wyatt's article entitled “Storytelling, Melancholia, and Narrative Structure in Louise Erdrich's *The Painted Drum*” is one of the few to explicitly address this section of the novel and the broader implications of reading it as an example of subverted oral storytelling. Wyatt interprets *The Painted Drum* as “[putting] the reader in the position of listener to oral storytelling, in the sense that the text requires the reader to adopt a way of thinking akin

to that of a listener to traditional storytelling” (14). The reader “listens” to Bernard's story from the same vantage point as the fictional listeners within the novel—we are not familiar with the traditions surrounding the drum or with the local legends surround the characters with whom the drum comes into contact. Bernard, presumably, realizes this, and thus has total control in what knowledge he wishes to divulge and how he wishes to divulge it. The reader, like Faye, remains a passive receptacle for this wizened knowledge as she puzzles through the details and connections Bernard orally illustrates.

If Wyatt is correct in this interpretation, though, the reader is left in a rather precarious position. Oral narrative within the Native tradition is famously unstable. It fluctuates, alters depending on all sorts of extenuating circumstances including the point the teller wishes to make with the story and facts about who is constituting the audience for the story. Basil Johnston, in the preface to *Ojibway Heritage*, writes that “each Ojibway story may embody several themes and meanings” (8). This seems de rigueur enough, but he continues on to note that “Ojibway stories are flexible in nature and scope. It is for this reason that they are best narrated. Skill and imagination will enable the storyteller to impart any level of meaning according to the scope and ability of his audience” (8). Additionally, Native storytelling is, of course, different depending on what indigenous nation or tribe the story springs from. All of this instability and variance carries over to the written recordings and reinterpretations of these oral stories.

In an early interview, conducted circa 1990 while Erdrich was still working primarily on the *Love Medicine* tetology, Erdrich points out that “writing is different from tribe to tribe, the images are different from tribe to tribe” (Coltelli 48). This faintly echoes the thesis of Paula Gunn Allen's “The Sacred Hoop: A Contemporary Perspective.”

In this essay, Allen asserts that “the significance of a literature can be best understood in terms of the culture from which it springs, and the purpose of literature is clear only when the reader understands and accepts the assumptions on which literature is based” (241). In the same interview cited above, Erdrich explains that her “first audience...is American Indians” (47). She then goes on to discuss the benefits, of all kinds, of a Pan-Indian outlook. However, her later work especially keys into specifically Ojibwe cultural cues, and it is upon these that I will focus here. I will do this because I will be assuming that to fully understand the operation of orality in *The Painted Drum*, and to fully understand what it means to be a “listener to oral storytelling” (Wyatt 14) rather than strictly a reader of the written word, one must understand the ways in which orality has functioned and continues to function in Ojibwe culture. Only by making such an investigation may we approach an understanding of its translation onto the page.

One particularly salient cue that Ojibwe culture is extremely pertinent to the reading of Erdrich's work appears in the young adult novel *The Birchbark House*, which I will also discuss in greater detail further on in this section. Near the beginning of the novel, in the section entitled “Neebin (Summer),” the young protagonist, Omakayas, wants to hear a story,

but she knew that her Nokomis [grandmother] always refused, no matter how hard they begged, until the last frog was safely sleeping in the ground. Deydey [father], with his half-white blood, could often be persuaded because the stories he told were different from Nokomis's. Hers were adisokaan stories, meant only for winter. Deydey usually talked about his travels, the places he'd seen and the people, the close calls and momentous encounters with animals, weather, other Anishinabeg, and best of all, ghosts. (61)

In the glossary Erdrich provides at the end of *The Birchbark House*, *adisokaan* is defined as “a traditional story that often helps explain how to live as an Ojibwa” (241). This aspect of traditional Ojibwe storytelling, subtly slipped into Erdrich's first young adult novel as a means of building suspense for the rather tame, secularized windigo story to follow, mirrors the emphatic point made by Gerald Vizenor in his introduction to *Summer in the Spring: Ojibwe Lyric Poems and Tribal Stories*. In this introduction, Vizenor clarifies that *Summer in the Spring* is a volume which collects in “a written voice, new world cinemas from the oral tradition, a single version of the tales *the people* told during the cold winter woodland nights when the *anishinaabeg* tellers were certain that *naanabozho* was not about, listening in the face of an animal or flower, as he does in the summer when stories should not be told” (14-15)⁴. In Ojibwe storytelling, there is a time for telling certain kinds of stories, and a traditionally rigid distinction between what sorts of stories may be told when and by whom.

Such concerns do not seem to come into play when these stories are translated into the written word and printed within the pages of mass-market paperback books. Indeed, they cannot, because the control which the narrator exercises in oral story telling is at odds with the democratic process of reading in which the reader is an equal participant while making choices as to how the story will be engaged with. I first read *The Birchbark House* in one sitting on a warm summer day, out on a porch surrounded by flowers just perfect for Nanabozho to peek around, but Omakayas, within the novel, had to wait until “Biboon (Winter)” to hear Nokomis's stories, including the creation story “Nanabozho and Muskrat Make an Earth” (172). Perhaps this distinction is merely a

⁴Italics in original.

function of time passing, the shedding of traditional ways which served a larger purpose no longer necessary within Ojibwe culture. In *Tracks*, the telling of stories is presented as something both life saving and powerful enough to be feared. The stories Nanapush tells span the seasons because, he reasons, “talk is an old man's last vice....During the year of sickness...I saved myself by starting a story....I got well by talking” (46).

In addition to these constraints imposed by seasons, there are also constraints prompted by concerns of the sacred. These concerns *do* affect the ways in which stories are disseminated through text. As part of the Author's Note which concludes *The Painted Drum*, Erdrich writes, “as in all of my books, no sacred knowledge is revealed. I check carefully to make certain everything I use is written down already” (277). Jim Clark, an elder Ojibwe man interviewed by Erdrich for Anton Treuer's bilingual anthology *Living Our Language: Ojibwe Tales and Oral Histories*, perhaps provided some inspiration for this caveat. In his story “How Indian People Were Gifted” Clark explains that

Indian people were given these Drums and the medicine dance and tobacco to use. That is how the Indian people were gifted....on the other hand, the white man created his knowledge of everything from a book. He wrote it down in a book. But today people don't understand it. The [Indian] shouldn't read things in that...And he couldn't write down somewhere things that were not to be written.⁵ (loc. 1294)

The distinction Clark makes here between that which is given and that which is created is further elucidated by Allen, again in “The Sacred Hoop.” “Symbols in American Indian systems,” she argues, “are no symbolic in the usual sense of the word. The words

⁵Use of brackets in original. Echoing Clark's comments here, in his prelude to the stories narrated by another Ojibwe man, Archie Mosay, Treuer notes that “no sacred legends from the *Midewiwin* were ever recorded. Archie always strictly maintained that those stories could only be learned in the Medicine Lodge itself and that they had to be passed on through oral tradition, without the aid of modern technology” (loc. 394).

articulate reality—not 'psychological' or imagined reality, not emotive reality captured metaphorically in an attempt to fuse thought and feeling, but that reality where thought and feeling are one, where objective and subjective are one, where speaker and listener are one, where sound and sense are one” (257-58). Thus, the drum which serves as the focal piece of *The Painted Drum*, the object which connects the novel's otherwise disparate characters and narrative sections, ought not be read figuratively if one is reading within the Ojibwe tradition. Neither, then, can Bernard's oral iteration of the drum's history because the history of the symbolic object (again, symbolic in the particular sense described by Allen) cannot be ripped from the actuality of it. Following the traditional Native interpretation of both the drum and the story—as much as we can, granted the limited body of work on the subject that non-Ojibwe/non-traditional Ojibwes have to work with—it would seem that we should read the details of Bernard's oration as including groupings of facts to which we must assent if we are to grasp the reflection of our own contemporary world being mirrored back upon us within the pages of a fictionalized narrative.

And yet, to return to Vizenor's introduction to *Summer in the Spring*: “the tales of the *anishinaabeg* are not objective collections and interpretations of historical facts or pedagogical models,” he explains. “Stories are dream circles, visual images and oratorical gestures showing the meaning between the present and the past: word cinemas in the lives of the tribal people of the woodland” (15). What seems to be exposed here through the comparison of Allen's and Vizenor's ontology of narrative is a distinction between stories and the objects that compose these stories. It is a distinction which Allen would

describe in terms of myth and ceremony which she identifies as the two key elements working in conjunction to define Native literature as Native.

In Allen's Native ontology, myths are the connecting narratives that locate and make sense of ceremony. In Allen's words, "the ceremony is the ritual enactment of a specialized perception of a cosmic relationship, while the myth is a prose record of that relationship" (248). Ceremonies—the songs, dances, formalized gestures, and methods of engaging with religious entities—are the facts, the aspects of life of which we can, or should, be sure. Myths, on the other hand, are more fallible because they are inextricably linked with thought processes which Allen describes as "essentially mystical and psychic in nature. Its distinguishing characteristic is a kind of magicalness—not [a] childish sort...but rather an enduring sense of the fluidity and malleability, or creative flux, of things" (255).

Thus, Bernard's oral history of the drum in Erdrich's *The Painted Drum* can indeed be read figuratively but with the caveat that the drum itself cannot also be interpreted similarly. The drum, it must be remembered, is a sacred, ceremonial object about which the majority of readers will never know certain things. Neither, the reader may safely assume, will any or most of the fictional listeners within the book. Bernard's narration ends rather conclusively with a quick rundown of how the drum ended up in storage with the Tatro brothers and the solemn observation that "all those afflicted, bothered, or healed and made whole by that drum are gone. Only the songs remain" (186). The next section of the novel, "The Little Girl Drum," relates how the drum is brought out of retirement and put to use once again, but it is unclear whether Faye and her mother are ever exposed to this string of events. When Shawnee, a young girl fleeing the cold

and hunger of her home, follows the beat of the drum to Bernard's house, he explains to Ira, Shawnee's mother, that the "drum is still covered up in the corner, where it always sits" (221) indicating that the drum has acted of its own accord without human assistance but also that he has kept the drum after the departure of the Travers women. The details of the drum's present are closed off, then, to some of the novel's characters but not the reader while any explanation of why the drum has chosen this moment to re-awaken for Ira's family are obscured, within the novel, from everyone, characters and readers alike.

The drum, therefore, seems to exist in a place connected to but separate from Bernard's narrative of its history, a narrative which is itself closed off from the reader to a degree not ascertainable because of the narrative's separation from realism, determinism, and other common Western assumptions about the relationships between words and such entities to which the words refer, the signifier and the signified. The reader cannot conceptualize the drum in its entirety—there are connotations the reader will likely never know. None of these pronouncements on the "correct" way to read Ojibwe literature should come as a surprise to anyone familiar with literary criticism post-Saussure. Still, Ojibwe literature possesses difficulties pertaining to its distinctively Native position with the oral tradition, already discussed in some detail above, and its unique location in sociopolitical literary space. It is worth re-quoting Womack's words of caution: "It is way too premature for Native scholars to deconstruct history when we haven't yet constructed it" (3).

So, how are we to interpret Bernard's story of the sacred cedar drum? Returning to the original question with which I opened this line of inquiry, to what extent should we or can we read his story as a textual reinterpretation of oral storytelling? To answer these

questions, it will be helpful to consider the textual clues which have us presumptively link the second and third sections of *The Painted Drum* to traditional storytelling practices. The novel, like most of Erdrich's novels, uses sections to signal shifts in narrator. In *The Painted Drum*, chapters further divide the sections in order to keep the formal telling of, for instance, "The Shawl" distinct from the preceding denouement, explicated by Bernard, of the Travers women's arrival in town. These formal typographical signals serve as one potential "clue."

Textual indicators of intended audience are also crucial in deciding whether to read a given passage as related to the oral storytelling tradition. Peterson, again in her discussion of *Tracks* as cited above, discusses the distinction between the character Pauline who "addresses no one in particular, which means essentially she is addressing a reader, not a listener" and Nanapush who is narrating to Lulu and is, thus, to be more closely identified with the oral tradition (30). This model for identifying oral versus textual narrative within a stable text seems to fit perfectly onto *The Painted Drum*: the first and last sections, which focus on Faye Travers, are not clearly being narrated for the benefit of any particular person. It is established early in the second section, however, that Bernard has gathered together a select group of individuals to whom the remainder of section two is addressed.

Another potential clue is the use of key phrases to signal the shift in historical perspective. In the first sentence of "The Shawl," the beginning of Bernard's narration of the drum's history and thus the likely beginning of the shift into a re-appropriation of oral storytelling, we are informed that the following story finds its source "among the Anishinaabeg" (108). This use of "Anishinaabeg" rather than "Ojibwe," the preferred

term throughout the sections of the novel set in the present, puts an emphasis on specifically Native identity. Issues of Native identity are, in the text's first section, downplayed by being relegated mostly to somewhat cynical asides. Faye muses on the extent to which Ojibwe death rituals have informed her methodology as an antiques dealer, but for the most part she seems to acknowledge the limited role Native identity has played in her life thus far. "My mother is perfectly assimilated, cold-blooded and analytical about reservation present, and utterly dismissive of history," (59) she notes. The use of "Anishinaabeg" to designate traditionals and "Ojibwe" to refer to contemporaries is consistent throughout the novel, and this distinction can be read as illustrative of a larger dialectic shift. This shift serves to distinguish, for the reading audience, between the world views held by the different characters. It seems rather clear that Bernard's narrative is meant to inform and instruct about traditional Ojibwe culture rather than simply to entertain a group of people temporarily amused by the reappearance of an ancient drum, and a part of this instruction includes a shifting of his audience's perception so that "Anishinaabeg" takes precedence over more contemporary terms.⁶

This point about the context-sensitive usage of the traditional versus the contemporary label for the Ojibwe nation springboards into a larger and somewhat more contentious issue which concerns the strictly linguistic history of indigenous oral storytelling. Erdrich herself, in *Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country*, describes Ojibwemowin, the traditional language of the Ojibwe peoples, as a spirit-infused

⁶In *Everything You Wanted to Know About Indians but Were Afraid to Ask*, Anton Treuer explains the difference contemporary Ojibwe see between the terms "Anishinaabe" and "Ojibwe." He writes, "Ojibwe people today use the term *Ojibwe* as a tribally specific term for self-reference (Ojibwe only) but also use *Anishinaabe* to refer to all Indians—Ojibwe, Dakota, and others (10). While this usage differs from the usage within *The Painted Drum*, it is not contradictory.

language. “A spirit or an originating genius belongs to each word,” she writes (73).

“Nouns are mainly designated as animate or inanimate, though what is alive and dead doesn't correspond at all to what an English speaker might imagine” (72). In his preface to the stories told by Archie Mosay as part of *Living Our Language*, Anton Treuer quotes Mosay who is discussing the proper protocol within the Ojibwe Medicine Lodge in which he works. “I can't use English in there,” Treuer quotes Mosay as saying. “The Spirit doesn't understand me when I use English” (loc. 357). Treuer extrapolates from this, concluding that “without the language, there is no *Midewiwin*, no Big Drum, no *Jiisakaan* (Shake Tent Ceremony). Without the Ojibwe language, there is no Ojibwe culture” (loc. 357-365). What these two brief comments on the language express quite clearly is that there is something which is, if not known objectively then at least very strongly subjectively felt, privileged about Ojibwemowin and the ways in which it can be, should be, and is used.

David Treuer, brother of the above cited Anton Treuer, has controversially and to nearly universal condemnation criticized Erdrich for her failure to incorporate Ojibwemowin in her portrayals of traditional Ojibwe culture to an extent that he might deem successful and worthwhile. In *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual*, David Treuer hones in on *The Antelope Wife* and *Love Medicine*, and he argues that, in these novels at the very least, Erdrich “is falling back into the *idea* of Ojibwe language, not the language itself” (65), that she does not use Ojibwemowin purposefully or extensively enough to warrant the appearance of this language within texts which are otherwise

written exclusively in English.⁷ In other words, Treuer's objection is not that Erdrich does not use Ojibwemowin appropriately in her novels, whatever "appropriately" means.⁸ In my conclusion, I will address in further detail the substance of Treuer's complaint and I will make a fuller reply. Suffice it to say, for now, that criticisms such as Treuer's fail to understand what I am hoping I have been making clear throughout this writing: it is not enough simply to look at what is contained explicitly in the text. Readers must understand, in addition to that which is in the text, the cultural background from whence that text derives. If a reader is puzzled by the lack, as Treuer is in this instance, of Ojibwemowin in a novel about the Ojibwe, it is helpful for the reader to attempt to understand why this lack exists rather than assuming it is because the author does not herself know enough to include a wider variety of cultural details.

None of Erdrich's work is written or published in Ojibwemowin likely, in large part, because she herself is not fluent in what she notes is a language which has been "entered into the *Guinness Book of World Records* as one of the most difficult languages to learn" (*Books* 69), although she is a student of the language because, she asserts, "for an American writer, it seems crucial to at least have a passing familiarity with the language, which is adapted to the land as no other language can possibly be" (71). That she does not fluently speak the language should be a suitable enough response to the rather arrogant and uselessly antagonistic points made by Treuer in "Smartberries," the essay from which the above argument comes. At any rate, I believe it to be a suitable enough response if any sort of response must be directly given, and yet I also believe that

⁷Or, as is the case with *The Antelope Wife*, exclusively in English save for a smattering of German to complement the smattering of Ojibwemowin. See Treuer's *Native American Fiction* 56-62 for his discussion of the difference he sees in Erdrich's treatment of Ojibwemowin versus German.

⁸An earlier version of this argument also appears in "Smartberries."

Treuer is, again in “Smartberries,” keying in on a difficult point about the role to be played by traditional language in contemporary works of fiction by indigenous authors. Ojibwemowin is the language of the traditional stories, those stories which serve as the foundation for our current understandings of oral storytelling as well as the cultures those stories helped to create and sustain.

Ojibwemowin is still a language which is still very much alive. Erdrich tells us in *Books and Islands* that words such as *wiindibaaanens*, which means computer, have been created to fill the linguistic need prompted by the introduction of new objects (72); such linguistic inventions define Ojibwemowin as indeed thriving rather than dying. It is for this reason that native speakers of the language can still insist on the exclusive use of Ojibwemowin in particular settings and it is, perhaps, also for this reason that critics such as David Treuer feel justified in making the sort of argument for the extended usage of the language by persons who seem otherwise to be attempting to accurately portray their own culture “authentically” through the written word.

To conclude by returning to my larger point concerning the identifying markers of orality within a text, I shall pose this question: how crucial to the definition of traditional or oral storytelling is it that the story be told in the traditional language of the peoples who most closely culturally identify with those stories? It seems clear that the answer to this question is very context-sensitive. Some stories, such as the *adisokaan* referenced in *The Birchbark House*, seem to carry embedded within them more restrictions among traditional Ojibwe people, much as the ancient stories purporting to contain the roots of the culture do in all societies. The preservation of these stories is considered to be pivotal, particularly within a group that has been historically threatened, once decimated, and

continually oppressed by other, larger societies. In other words, the preservation of the stories is the preservation of the culture, and integrally related to both the stories and the culture is the language.

However, within a group among whom there is a relatively low number of native speakers of the language, as is the case with the Ojibwe, it is impractical and counter-productive to insist that all cultural output utilize the traditional language. Estimates of the number of individuals fluent in Ojibwemowin range between 1,000 and 5,000 people; it is a “severely endangered” language (University of Minnesota). Special ceremonies such as the Big Drum Ceremony referenced by Archie Mosay in Anton Treuer's interview may get away with an insistence upon Ojibwemowin, but that ability is a function of the fact that it is a ceremonial event. Audience members need not possess the degree of fluency necessary to interfere with the events, to add their own voices, demands, and enthusiasms to the narrative.

The case is slightly different when it comes to the exchange of non-ceremonial storytelling. This sort of storytelling is by definition fluid, dependent upon audience involvement to some extent to ensure that the story unfolds appropriately and accurately reflects the moment of its telling. Such stories may still be traditional and intended to educate the listener about some aspect of Ojibwe history and/or culture, but, as illustrated in *The Birchbark House*, to return to my previous example, these stories can bear a bit more flexibility, especially in their contemporary iterations. A part of this flexibility involves a linguistic flexibility—these stories may be altered, subverted, translated.

From the above discussion, it is clear that there are many traditions operating within even a small sample of text from Louise Erdrich's work, and she is but one of

several Ojibwe authors working to incorporate the old with the new, to engage the traditional in discussion with the evolution of contemporary storytelling. I would like now to turn to another prominent theme in Erdrich's work, that of the role played by names and the process of naming in traditional and contemporary narratives, as a further example of the readings which are possible when a bit of cultural background knowledge is applied to a work of Native literature.

Naming in *The Antelope Wife* and *The Birchbark House*

Names, markers of personal identity for human beings everywhere, carry particular weight in Ojibwe culture which has traditionally used the process of naming as a tool of protection and enhanced survival. Thus, character names for Erdrich carry much weight. In this section, I will explore the various ways in which Erdrich plays with the historical facts and cultural mythologies surrounding traditional Ojibwe naming culture. To do this, I will explore the various ways in which the process of naming is illustrated in *The Birchbark House* and *The Antelope Wife*. The process of naming plays, in both novels, an integral role in the understanding and preservation of Ojibwe culture within a world that has rapidly, and not with the full consent of the concerned parties, become multi-cultural in a way that is more damaging to the Ojibwe culture and its adherents than to the white culture, or culture of dominance, to borrow Vizenor's term. Naming serves as a way to subvert the negative effects of these changes and to create resilient identities for individuals that link them, in a way that is protective, to their communal histories.

Before beginning my discussion of Erdrich's texts, it will be most fruitful to first discuss the cultural norms pertaining to the naming process in traditional Ojibwe culture. Names, within traditional Ojibwe custom, are not bestowed upon the birth of the child but, rather, upon the establishment of the child firmly within the material world. A child in the womb is not, in traditional Ojibwe culture, considered to be a distinct individual with the assumption of agency exercisable from birth as is often assumed in traditional white European cultures. Rather, as Gerald Vizenor explains in his book *Summer in the Spring*, “it is believed that every child, while he is in his mother's womb, wonders what *disposition his parents are going to make of him*” (65). The child who is yet unborn is an amalgamation of his community—the desired dispositions of his mother and father and, as shall be discussed further on, the projected dreams of his extended family: members of his tribe, his *niiawee*, and, in a sense, the gichimanidoo, the spirit figure who teaches and protects the Anishinaabe people.

The path to a child's full materialization as an individual within his community comes to the Ojibwe child later in life with the bestowal of an Ojibwemowin name. Before this happens, to fill the in-between time after the birth of the child and before the official naming ceremony can take place, “a *nickname* is generally given by the parents or some other relative of the child” (*Summer* 66). Nicknames have, as I shall discuss at much greater length in just a moment, a powerful and significant role in Anishinaabe and other Indian cultures, but they cannot be understood to operate in the same way culturally as official names which tend to serve a wider purpose within the tribally constituted public. In the section of *Summer in the Spring* entitled “Naming Children,” Vizenor

explains that “the *real name* of the *anishinaabe* child is given only by his *niiawee*, which is usually done when the child has become sick for the first time” (66).

The *niiawee* is, Vizenor continues, “the person to whom the life of the child will be dedicated” (65) and it becomes the *niiawee*'s task, once he has been appointed by the child's father, to seek out an appropriate name for the child through dreams of an animal. These dreams, traditionally, are followed by a hunt for that animal and then a feast at which the animal is served to the child and his community as part of a ceremonial celebration of the expected longevity of the child. Having survived his first illness and been the successful subject of a connection made between the material and spiritual world by his *niiawee*, the traditional Ojibwe belief is, at least as Vizenor presents it, that the child has a good chance of prospering with security in the life to which he has been born, and this is, obviously, a cause of much joy for the traditional Ojibwe community. As a relatively straightforward illustration of this naming process in action, I shall below consider Louise Erdrich's *The Birchbark House*.

In *The Birchbark House*, the first in a series of novels for young readers which follows the life of an Ojibwe girl named Omakayas, the importance of naming and the consequences of failing to assign “official” Ojibwemowin names within appropriate time intervals play more or less in the proscribed manner described by Vizenor. The novel tells the story of Omakayas and her family with a particular focus on her relationship with her infant brother called Neewo, or “fourth” in Ojibwemowin, who is too young to have yet received a proper name. During the year covered by *The Birchbark House*, the community is hit by a particularly harsh winter made harsher by an outbreak of small-pox which proves to be for Neewo that pivotal first illness which would have, had he survived

it, served as the last obstacle to his readiness for a proper Ojibwemowin name. As it is, though, Neewo does not survive small pox, perhaps because he was too fragile, his immune system too undeveloped, to withstand the disease, and perhaps also, in part, because of his lack of a name which would have ensured a measure of protection from gichimanidoo.

Early in the novel, which opens during a rather bucolic summer, unsuccessful attempts are made to perform the process of bestowing upon Neewo a proper name. These attempts are made by the “seven or eight people on the island who possessed the right to give names....Mama had asked, and each of them had tried. But not one of them had yet dreamed about a name for Neewo” (39). Such an informal method of searching out a *niiawee*, informal in comparison to the process described by Vizenor in *Summer in the Spring*, anyway, as well as the prominence of the maternal figure rather than the paternal figure, who Vizenor describes as typically heading the search, suggest that the community portrayed in *The Birchbark House* has deviated a bit from the traditions of their ancestors though the key aspects of the belief system remain firm. Erdrich traces the evolution of this belief system, as she traces the evolution of other belief systems, in many of her novels. Other novels set closer to our own contemporary times, such as *The Antelope Wife*, portray the role of the naming process in Ojibwe culture as even further degraded than they appear to be in *The Birchbark House*. The effect in these later books is the suggestion that what remains of the belief system has increased importance for the characters who are navigating the twentieth and twenty-first centuries with the constant struggle of retaining a hold on the remaining vestiges of traditional belief systems.

During the time period portrayed in *The Birchbark House*, though, more aspects of the traditional naming process are actively practiced than are not. The importance of the nickname which proceeds the official name is one of these aspects, and it is on this that I wish to focus now. Following the lack of success in her community's attempts to provide Neewo with an official name and feeling, presumably, that Neewo (which, remember, means “four” in Ojibwemowin and is used by the family because Neewo is the fourth child) lacks that personal touch which is such an important part of a good nickname, Omakayas “decide[s] in secret that the naming was up to her” (40) and appropriates the names of the birds living in her area to use in reference to her brother. “Chickadee” is the one that sticks, and this is how she refers to Neewo privately throughout the novel including after his death. Despite the fact that Omakayas is described as having “those dizzy moments that, her grandma said, meant she was special to the spirits” (38) and despite the fact that she is able to commune with the spirit world through, for example, her interactions with animals such as the bear cubs she meets early on in the novel who treat her as one of their own, she is not considered old enough to serve as *niiawee* for Neewo. Thus, her nickname for Neewo remains just that—a nickname—though it is possible to read the nickname as privileged in some way because it is clear that Omakayas is privileged insofar as she clearly has the capacity to perform such important roles as providing Ojibwemowin names.

As I stated early on in this paper, nicknames were and are often used as placeholders for Ojibwe personhood. Until a child proved himself able (and, arguably, willing) to remain in the material world, he was considered to be half in the spirit world and thus something like a separate species, connected to but also somewhat removed

from the material concerns of the fully human members of his community. None of this is meant to suggest, however, that nicknames are or were insignificant in and of themselves or that they were markers of some sort of neglect or a low valuation of the life or potential personhood of the child. In *Manifest Manners*, a collection of original essays pertaining to survivance of Indians of any and all affiliation, Vizenor argues that nicknames are a crucial tool for survivance. Survivance is a term created by Vizenor to describe the practice of surviving all forms of imperialist dominance, while avoiding the staticity of victimhood, through the embracing of a wide variety of modes of resistance. Otherwise put, in Vizenor's own words, “survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (vii). Vizenor further explicates this connection between survivance and the significance to this project of nicknames when he writes, later in *Manifest Manners*, that “nicknames, dreams, and shamanic visions are tribal stories that are heard and remembered as survivance” (104); nicknames, and the traditional process of naming within Ojibwe culture, are able to serve the goals of survivance because these names “are sources of personal power in tribal consciousness; personal stories are coherent and name individual identities within tribal communities” (104).

Vizenor, in *Manifest Manners*, is specifically addressing autobiographical writing. He is unraveling the ways in which nicknames, evasive and subversive uses of pronouns, identification of the self with unconventional others such as animals, and so on can provide a space for the individual—alone or as constituent part of a larger community—to creatively construct and deconstruct herself on her own terms. *The Birchbark House* is

not, of course, autobiographical, and neither is *The Antelope Wife*, which I shall bring into this discussion again momentarily, but Vizenor's arguments seem applicable all the same. In *The Birchbark House*, Erdrich is using the voices of Omakayas and her family to create and share an imagined vision of the proliferation of voices and identities which once existed but to whom we today have no access. These are voices and identities which existed prior to the coming of the forms of personal expression prioritized by contemporary Western audiences today such as writing with the use of the Roman alphabet. As strict autobiography remains permanently beyond our reach in relation to these groups, texts such as *The Birchbark House* must suffice as the field in which to engage in the play of revisionary survivance as described by Vizenor. Second, accepting the first point to be a sound one, we may safely assume that much of what is to be gleaned from autobiographical works pertaining to the use of names as spaces for individual and communal resistance and survivance may be gleaned too from fictional works which attempt to represent the past, or, anyway, a version of it.

An obvious way to read *The Birchbark House* is to interpret baby Neewo's lack of an official Ojibwe name as foreshadowing of his death. Neewo must necessarily, according to Ojibwe custom, first become ill before he can be named. The necessary first sickness for Neewo, then, is the small pox virus, an almost inevitable plot point in any white-Native contact narrative set in pre-colonial America. Normally, it is the reader's background knowledge of the virility of the virus that allows it to serve as such a potent symbol of death on a devastating scale. In *The Birchbark House*, however, the virus operates a bit differently than the reader might expect it to—it maims and it kills, yes, creating misery throughout the island's community, but it does not slay on the large scale

readers likely associate with small pox. Everyone in her family except Omakayas herself falls ill, from the hearty outdoorsman Deydey to the elderly grandmother Nokomis, but only the baby fully succumbs and dies of it. Only child number four—possessing no recourse but to fight against the disease without the aid of a name and a name's associated powers of protection—only he among Omakayas's family dies. It is therefore Neewo's lack of a proper name, it is suggested, that should serve for the reader as the determining element which surely foreshadows this character's death.

Such a reading, which is likely rather obvious once the reader becomes informed of traditional Ojibwe naming practices and the belief system intertwined with the proscribed naming process, is, of course, not the whole of what is happening in *The Birchbark House*. Indeed, in the “grand scheme” of Native history, it could seem that the small pox outbreak described here just serves as *de rigueur* historical background to the tragic though small story of the return to the spirit world of a baby who never fully left it. What Vizenor's theory of postindian survivance and the role played by the subversion of names suggests, though, is that the closing off of the baby's story read as causally linked to the baby's lack of an official name is tied to larger issues pertaining to tribal community and the future of traditional Ojibwe ways of life.

In “Double Others,” another essay in *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor asks whether “the absence of the heard in tribal stories [has] turned to the literature of dominance?” Further, “What are the real names, nouns, and pronouns heard in the fields of tribal consciousness? How can a pronoun be a source of tribal identities in translation? How can a pronoun be essential, an inscription of absence that represents the presence of sound and a person in translation?” (60). How can we, the readers of *The Birchbark*

House, through Erdrich who is herself several generations removed from the time period and cultural norms given new life in her novel, access the markers of individual identity within tribal communities irrevocably altered by time and the damages of imperialism or dominance?

Neewo dies known as a number in translation, mirroring the numbers of Native children who died as a result of US governmental policies, victims of starvation and disease as Native peoples were systematically forced off of their land and of the malfeasance and neglect which occurred in boarding schools across the country. Despite being the referent of a literal number, however, Neewo is more than a number even in name. That Neewo is a loved and valued member of his family is evidenced by, to provide just one example, Omakayas's creation of a proliferation of alternative nicknames for him (40). The use of a number as placeholder until he can be given a unique name of his own is not a suggestion that he is to his community nothing very special or not an individual in his own right as the numbers as placeholders for the names of Auschwitz victims were, for example. In fact, quite the contrary, the use by his family of "Neewo" as a placeholder represents an act of what Vizenor would call survivance. To understand what is meant by "Neewo" one must understand the story of who Neewo is and also of who his family is. As Vizenor puts it in his concluding remarks in "Double Others," "tribal identities are heard in names and stories, otherwise the simulations that antecede tribal stories and tragic wisdom would be tantamount to amnesia" (62).

To know that this unnamed baby who figures so prominently throughout *The Birchbark House* is called "four" is to know not only that he is the fourth child; it is to know that he is still part spirit, not fully materialized yet. To know that he is also called,

privately, “Chickadee” is to be able to understand the personalized story Omakayas has shaped about his connection with the birds who serve for her as her own connection to the spirit world. At the end of the novel, Omakayas is walking in the woods listening to the calls of the birds when she hears “something new in their voices. She heard Neewo. She heard her little brother as though he still existed in the world....*I’m all right*, his voice was saying....*You can depend on me. I’m always here to help you, my sister*” (239). This is the reassurance Omakayas needs to finish mourning and return to her life and her progress toward being a human channeler of the spirit world.

Thus, the private nicknames used to refer to the baby in *The Birchbark House* serve to tell the stories of the connections not only between the human characters living the narrative being told but also between those characters and a world larger than themselves—the spirit world and the intricate belief system of the traditional Ojibwe people. “Neewo” and “Chickadee” are stories entirely in themselves that connect to other stories that explain what was, what can and will be, and what should be. This is the purpose, as I have argued previously at much greater length, of traditional Native storytelling, and this is also, according to Vizenor, a way of keeping at bay the intimidating, silencing influence of the narratives of the dominant in which all that this baby was able to do in his short time on Earth would not and could not be properly acknowledged.

To further solidify this point, I would like now to draw a comparison between Neewo's story in *The Birchbark House* and the story of the twins Cally and Deanna (or Ozhaawashkmashkodikwe and Gaagigenagweyaabiikwe) in *The Antelope Wife*, a novel for an older audience first published a year before *The Birchbark House*. *The Antelope*

Wife, like so many of Erdrich's novels, contains too many intricately overlapping story lines to be adequately summarized in the short space that I have here. Suffice it to say that *The Antelope Wife* traces the history of a family created when a cavalry soldier, sent as part of a raid on an Ojibwe community, comes into contact with a woman named Ozhaawashkmashkodikwe, or Blue Prairie Woman, and her daughter, Other Side of the Earth, or Matilda. The soldier, a private by the name of Scranton Roy, is horrified by the carnage which ensues during the raid and chooses to stop fighting and adopt the girl he calls Matilda and raise her as his own. This begins a legacy of complicated white-Ojibwe relationships which echo throughout carefully traced generations leading up to the present day and the story of Cally and Deanna and how they come to receive the traditional Ojibwe names which will protect them from the perils of history.

One of the perils of history which Cally and Deanna must confront is the sudden presence in their home of a woman called Sweetheart Calico, the granddaughter of Matilda. Sweetheart Calico, a woman who seems to outsiders to be “weird and wild or FAS or learning disabled...or who is off her medication for some mental disorder even though she sometimes seems so pleasant and willing and kind and playful” (175) has been effectively kidnapped by the twins' uncle Klaus and brought into their home. One day, in her capacity as impromptu babysitter of the girls who are home “sick” from school, Sweetheart Calico takes them on a long walk lasting hours and traversing miles before she finally abandons them in the twilight hours, far from home, with only a Wiindigoo dog as a guide for the way back home.

This act of abandonment cannot be read as pure maliciousness, but, rather, it should be read as further evidence that Sweetheart Calico is not fully human. She has

inherited the nomadic disposition her ancestors had to forego after the raid on their village generations before, and she is not fully of the material world into which Klaus has relegated her by force. It is from this strong presence, so suggestive of the spirit world, that Cally and Deanna need to be protected. This is a strong twist on the arc presented in *The Birchbark House* because now the threat is not from the outside world—the white world with its encroaching, devastating diseases—but instead from the inside, from the same Ojibwe culture of which Cally and Deanna are, to a lesser degree, a part. The world inhabited by the characters of *The Antelope Wife* is more cross-cultural, and thus more complicated, more difficult for each character to parse out for his or her self. This increased complexity makes it more difficult to determine, as in the case of Sweetheart Calico, who is safe to trust, who is acting under the pressure of what forces, from whence those forces come, and how to successfully maneuver with intention through all of these complicated webs.

Rozin, the mother of Cally and Deanna, has previously resisted their grandmothers' attempts to perform the traditional naming ceremony for the girls. It takes the presence of Sweetheart Calico to persuade her of the need for traditional Ojibwe ceremonies of protection. Late in the novel, Rozin is talking to her cousin Cecille who asks her, “haven't you ever asked yourself...how this all affects us? Haven't you ever wondered how history is working on us?” When Rozin agrees, Cecille continues, explaining, “We developed as a people over many thousands of years. Our culture. Our ways. Our adaptations. Then all of a sudden in one generation—wham. Warp-speed acculturation. And now we're the products of two cultures” (216). This sudden biculturalism is, she goes on to argue, the cause of much of their contemporary distress.

“When our mothers tell the stories they heard from their grandmothers and great-grandmothers, we listen and nod as if we think the stories are true. But we don't think they're true. We don't think they're historical facts. Our minds don't work the same way as our ancestors' minds worked. Our minds sort fact from fiction. We think the stories are powerful, maybe, but metaphorical, merely” (216-17).

The lesson to be learned throughout the remainder of the novel, then, is that the traditional stories still have power and need to be recognized for the well-being of all concerned. Cally and Deanna, reeling from the effects of history which has happened so fast to be fully understood and which has happened at such a distance that their parents have been unable to see it for what it is, still somehow recognize the need to engage with this complex history through an engagement with the naming process. They ask their grandmothers, Giizis and Noodin, to name them, and they oblige with recognition of the traditions they are all about to take part in. “There will be a feast and a ceremony later. But at this moment, the grandmas feel they should proceed” (261). Deanna is given the name Gaagigenagweyaabiikwe, Everlasting Rainbow, “the footbridge that connects us with the other world” (262-63), and Cally is named after the original Blue Prairie Woman, Ozhaawashkmashkodikwe, with whom the novel opens.

Through their naming, many questions raised at the beginning of *The Antelope Wife* are answered as stories only previously hinted at and talked around are told. One of the grandmothers explains how she gambled with the original Blue Prairie Woman for her names and relays what she was told, long ago: “Our spirit names, they are like hand-me-downs which have once fit other owners. They still bear the marks and puckers. The shape of the other life” (267). The qualities of the names' previous owners are passed

down with the names themselves, strengthening and protecting the owner and ensuring the longevity of the stories crucial to a cultural understanding which allows the culture itself to be more easily navigable, relevant, and useful to the possessor of the name.

Neewo in *The Birchbark House* only ever possessed nicknames requiring, for full understanding of his place within the community and its communal memory, an understanding of the stories behind those nicknames. As discussed above, these layers of stories not only established his place within his family; they also protected him from bearing the markers of the white community causally responsible for his death. His essence cannot, because of his lack of an “official” name, be subjected to the narratives of dominance Vizenor derides because outsiders, ignorant of the attached stories, will not be able to access enough of his identity to successfully manipulate in narratives which would run counter to the cultural narratives of his people. For Cally and Deanna in *The Antelope Wife*, the traditional naming process works similarly to protect them from an attempted assimilation with the white world which cannot understand the risks and dangers inherent in the traditional Ojibwe belief system—it is not possible to hide from or dismiss as “metaphorical, merely” the likes of Sweetheart Calico and her pull on the world around her. The way to survive is to engage with the old traditions and space those traditions open up for the importance of a history which does not lie dormant in the past.

CHAPTER 3. GERALD VIZENOR

During my discussion of Erdrich, I commented on Vizenor's theoretical incorporation of naming and the creation of nicknames into his theory of survivance. Much of this theory is transferred directly onto the pages of his novels; within Vizenor's fiction his theoretical work serves as a way into a broader ironic re-appropriation of the ways in which the Ojibwe people and Natives generally have been portrayed and engaged with by themselves and by non-Native outsiders. Before delving into how Vizenor's theory plays out within his novels, it is worth examining what Vizenor has to say about the meaning of survivance outside of his own fictional interpretations. Survivance means different things in different contexts, and the contexts inherent in the plots of *Chair of Tears* and *Father Meme*, the two primary novels under discussion in this section, are about as different as it is possible for them to be while they both treat with the effects of centuries of non-Native dominance over Native persons and tribal sovereignty. Thus, while I have already alluded to and extrapolated a bit on survivance earlier during my discussion of Erdrich, a more in-depth look at survivance as applied strictly within the context of Vizenor's own work will be most helpful in the following discussion of Vizenor's novels.

In the preface to *Manifest Manners*, Vizenor defines survivance as “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction or a survivable

name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivancy” (vii). This rather oblique definition seems to pose more questions than it answers, but a parsing down of individual terms helps to shed light on the meaning behind the technical terms, many of which were coined by Vizenor himself to fill the linguistic gaps he perceives in our conversations about the reality and future of Native life.

To begin with the parsing of this definition of survivance at its own beginning, “an active sense of presence,” requires, first, for me to redress my use of the term “theory.” Throughout, I have been referring to Vizenor’s “theory” of survivance, to the position of the concept of survivance as at the forefront of Vizenor’s extensive “theorizing” of Native literature and cultural studies. This has been, technically, incorrect, a usage of a linguistic shortcut run rampant, for Vizenor clarifies in the preface to his edited anthology *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* that we ought not consider survivance as an abstraction of theory, relevant on the printed page but only haphazardly observable in the real world of human beings committing themselves to actions and the consequences of causation. Rather, he argues, we ought to be considering survivance as “a practice, not an ideology, dissimulation, or a theory” (11). Survivance is “active,” it is something that we do rather than merely something that we think or proselytize; it is something that requires one’s full mental and physical engagement. This is what Vizenor means by “an active sense of presence.”

Next, what does Vizenor mean by “the continuance of native stories”? Native stories are, presumably, the stories written by “natives” whom Vizenor writes, again in

his preface to *Survivance*, are individuals “prompted by natural reason, by a consciousness and sense of incontestable presence that arises from experiences in the natural world,” (11) though not, he is clear, by “a mere romance of nature” (11). The distinction is marked by an understanding of who is in charge in the relationship between human and the natural world: in the latter, it is supposed to be man, while in the former, it is neither man nor nature who reigns dominant. Rather, in a true native story, there is a somewhat symbiotic understanding between the human who thrives (physically, mentally, spiritually) on the land and the land which guides the human while thriving “by the favor of spirits in the water, rimy sumac, wild rice, thunder in the ice, bear, beaver, and faces in the stone” (11). This distinction, warning as it does against the link between dominance and romanticization (of nature and of man's position in nature) is a part of those “renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” mentioned in the original definition of survivance from *Manifest Manners*. To recognize this distinction, in other words, is to recognize the subtle ways in which dominance, tragedy, and victimry can pervade aspects of one's life which one might not otherwise connect with such insidious effects.

It is not only dominance over nature, however, that practitioners of survivance must be wary of. Dominance takes many forms, Vizenor rightly points out, and we can recognize many of these forms through the spotting of manifest manners, “the racist notions and misnomers sustained...as 'authentic' representations of *indian* cultures” (*Manifest* vii). What those exercising their manifest manners do, Vizenor further clarifies, is “court the destinies of monotheism, cultural determinism, objectivism, and the structural conceits of savagism and civilization” (*Manifest* vii). “Dominance” thus encompasses, in this context, any course of action or belief system which infringes and

constricts the practice of survivance, the active presence of Native peoples who live and share and engage with their stories of their lives and identities and the world.

Resistance to dominance includes resistance to the effects of dominance, as well; to resist dominance is to resist casting oneself in the role of passive victim or wrecked casualty of tragedy. Often, this resistance must take place within the boundaries of the contact zone, the space in which Native people encounter and are denied by the non-Native individual or institution. This is not always the case, though. In “Woodland Word Warrior,” Rouff writes that “Vizenor's descriptions of the cultural wars ring true because he accurately depicts both the underlying causes of these wars and the nature of the wounds suffered by tribal people. Many of these wounds are self-inflicted” (22). Though Rouff is talking here about Vizenor's fiction, and the cultural wars represented, under various guises, in so many of his novels, her comment could just as easily apply to Vizenor's nonfiction. To practice survivance is to deny the power of dominance, of cultural wars, of tragic circumstances, and of hardship of any kind to turn oneself into a victim, a passive receptacle of anger and pain, a perpetrator of the same manifest manners back upon oneself or others.

Thus the above is, unpacked but still only in summary, the meaning of survivance, the meaning of Vizenor's definition broken down into its component parts. It is this extrapolation of survivance which appears in so many of his novels, which is played with, expanded upon, manipulated for illustrative purposes, but always tied explicitly and implicitly back to that abstract notion outlined in various volumes constituting Vizenor's critical oeuvre. I would like now to turn to Vizenor's 2012 novel *Chair of Tears*, an expansion on the “Chair of Tears” section in an earlier novel, *Earthdivers* (1981), to

explore how survivance is presented within a fictional context. I will then turn my attention to *Father Meme* (2008) to highlight the wide variance in ways of fictitiously representing survivance.

Chair of Tears follows the exploits of an Ojibwe man by the name of Captain Shammer who has been chosen, despite his professed utter lack of qualifications of any kind, to chair the department of Native Studies at an unnamed midwestern university. Captain Shammer has big plans for the department: his primary goal is to sell the department just as soon as he makes a few changes such as removing all faculty members from their offices, replacing the previous course listings with such offerings as a graduate seminar in stray visions, the establishment of a publishing house (“Denivance Press”) specializing exclusively in books with entirely blank pages, lessons in gambling at an in-house casino headed by Captain Shammer’s grandmother Quiver, and “last lectures” or confessional speeches in which the speaker informs his or her audience of all of the “fakery” and “cultural poaching” he or she is guilty of. Each of these replacement activities highlights at least one facet of survivance, offering the students of the university and the readers of the novel a variety of ways into an understanding of what it means to thrive by existing and resisting as a Native person. By picking out various aspects of the university system which, Vizenor seems to be suggesting, are particularly evocative of the problems posed to humanity by institutionalized systems, and by subverting those aspects to make them work with individuals in an entirely new way, Vizenor is demonstrating survivance on a grand scale. *Chair of Tears* shows us, essentially, how we might practice survivance as a group against even the most thoroughly engrained of systems, the university.

Perhaps the section of *Chair of Tears* most clearly evocative of survivance is the penultimate chapter, “Stray Visions,” in which Captain Shammer heads a graduate seminar geared toward helping a select group of students capture stray visions which, the novel's helpfully erudite but unnamed narrator tells us, are “always teachable by irony, by incongruity, and by the play of contradictions, but not by deadbolt structural interpretations, the definitions of culture by anthropology, or the representations of absence in history” (108). This oblique definition mirrors the definition proffered by Isernhagen in her conversation with Vizenor in 1994. Attempting to summarize Vizenor's discoursing on “survivance energy” (90), she captures the essence of the idea as being energy that “would actually couple the notion of difference, of embracing difference, notions of fluidity and dynamics, with the notion of survival. And then you would ground survival not in the preservation of this or that essence but clearly in change, in dynamics, in the ability to deal with history” (91). In both elucidations, there is that focus on engagement with history, with the nitty-gritty details of the scenes of survivance, with the gaps in the situation which open up a space for action.

Shammer himself does not bother with such academic parsing of what it is that he means for his students to accomplish through his seminar which he has decided to create out of boredom (108). Rather, “Shammer carried out the actual stories of survivance, but not the arbitrary or common conversations of survivance.... Natural reason, stray visions, and survivance were creative maneuvers, not academic conversations” (107). Shammer's refusal to, as it were, play the academic game and open up survivance to the usual rounds of classroom discourse complete with technical definitions, illuminating handouts, and dense textbooks (the only textbook he assigns is a blank book called *Stray Visions*

“written” by himself [110]) is reminiscent of the discussion I engaged in earlier, in regard to Erdrich's *The Painted Drum*, about the distance which separates the power of a written story and the power of a story communicated orally. Shammer is, as the orator of a traditional oral narrative might, controlling the words and ideas contained in the narrative, locating spaces for differences in versions of the stories to be told, and providing spaces for audience engagement. In other words, Vizenor, through Shammer, shows us what Erdrich, utilizing a realist stylistic approach, seems to describe more than enact. Shammer is, in a way, insisting upon a traditional approach to the passing on of a lesson combining traditional practices with a contemporary framework—survivance.

Each student in Shammer's graduate seminar takes a different approach to their semester project which is to “pack a blank book with original ideas about natural reason and stray visions” (110). Students are “required...to live by stray visions and imagination on the street, under bridges, and to become vagrants overnight in the junkyards on the riverbank near the university” (111) but they are forbidden from utilizing the resources of the library to write the “original ideas, visual scenes, and to create ironic stories” (111) which will be the written content of their lived experiences in the practice of survivance. The results are varied: one student wears a Hubert Humphrey mask while scoping out the lobby of a local bank and an adult theater (113); another student achieves a similar sort of outward defamiliarization by speaking exclusively in double negatives (115); yet another student desires to conduct his search for his own stray vision “never tainted by sacrifice,” allowing a biblical-sized hoard of mosquitos to feast on his blood during a night of camping (117).

As Vizenor moves through the listing of students in Shammer's seminar, what results is a list of paths one can take to the achievement of a stray vision. This list of paths to stray visions comes to resemble a list of methods by which one can practice survivance. First, there is the use of masks to assimilate with just enough trickery that one will be detected, forcing an engagement with the masked individual and a discussion about the reasoning behind the masking. Second is a totemic association with animals which is explored by an Ojibwe student in Shammer's class; she describes what she has done as a "union of chance with rock art images and aliens [which is] a stray totemic vision, or maybe an ordinary trickster story or a rumor that has lasted for more than a thousand years" (120). She continues on to conclude that "Natives are the aliens in captivity stories" (120) which is a subversive rewriting of the history and sociological position of Natives; it is a defiance of anthropology and other academic proscriptions on who Native people are and why they are "like that."

A third methodology proffered by Vizenor through one of his fictional graduate students is the practice of "making stories out of stories" (122). This is the pulling out of details from a story to digress into another story and then another and another. What this achieves is a perpetuation of the story as the ending is endlessly deferred, at least in theory: this mirrors the decrees of survivance in which one keeps on surviving and resisting no matter what happens or how difficult it becomes. As General Badger, the Ojibwe student who describes this process, puts it, "no one with a choice gives up in the face of death. No one. So, would you call that survivance? Right, survivance by stray visions" (123).

Yet another student, identified as Trauma Queen, comes to understand, over the course of the semester, why the notion of victimry can have no place in the genuine practice of survivance. “Narratives of victimry are a cultural and psychological burden, and the causes of historical absence,” she writes in her blank book at the end of the semester. “No one can bear a sense of absence without resistance and irony. Stories of survivance and stray visions have the capacity to heal, to teach, reveal, resist, and to show native humor and irony. That idea is absolutely missing in narratives of irony” (126). This explanation reflects the essence of Vizenor’s more analytical theorizing on the abhorrent role the victimizing of oneself and others plays in oppression, domination, and a numbing of the spirit. Resistance against victimry is similar to the resistance against passive death, or the passive participation in causing death, described in the previous paragraph. Both of these approaches to Shammer’s stray vision assignment demand that practitioners of survivance engage and negotiate with the unpleasant aspects of life as well as those aspects which hold obvious potential for pleasure and redemption.

The “unpleasant aspects of life” are dealt with quite heavily in *Father Meme*, the next book of Vizenor’s that I will bring into this discussion. In this novel, the notion of “warrior survivance,” an aspect of survivance left generally unexplored in *Chair of Tears*, is introduced as the narrator attempts to provide a narrative history of his life to a French historian and lawyer visiting his reservation casino. The climax of this man’s life occurred when, as young altar boys obscenely and repeatedly molested by a lecherous priest named Father Meme and his lover, a monk identified as Swayback, the narrator and his two friends decide to brutally torture and kill their reservation priest. This escalation from the narrator’s positioning of his young self as a victim to a positioning of himself as

a warrior of survivance does not happen overnight, of course; along the way he is aided by historical lessons such as the one passed down to him by his uncle Gorgeous concerning the legendary Ojibwe fighter Hole in the Day.

Hole in the Day, “the distinguished warrior” also known as Bugonaygeshig, led a troop of Leech Lake Pillager clan warriors against the United States Army in the late nineteenth century, using the skills of European diplomacy and his command of the English language to lead his warriors in a stand-off against the army which resulted in zero Native casualties, though there were a few amongst the soldiers (Sandy Lake). Though Hole in the Day was briefly imprisoned for his role in the uprising, the narrator of *Father Meme* explains to his French interlocutor that “the elusive natives won the war in a single day” (92). This is because, he explains, channeling his uncle’s somewhat romanticized interpretation of the events, “there was never a plausible reason to declare war on the Pillagers” (92). The lesson the narrator comes away with, as a boy, is, “we should learn the enemy way and fight for survivance over victimry. The Altar Boy War was the start of our practice as warriors” (93).

Across the Native community, efforts have been ongoing as Native people have attempted to identify the best ways of responding to the sorts of sexual abuse and ensuing feelings of powerlessness described in *Father Meme*. In a powerful op-ed piece for the *New York Times*, written in February of 2013 as election season brought out the worst in politicians regarding what ought to be done about the issue of abortion in cases of rape, Louise Erdrich points out in eloquently stark language the disparity between how cases of

rape are handled on and off of the reservation⁹. Issues of jurisdiction, jury tampering, and poorly written legislation have made it difficult for tribal courts to enact justice in cases of rape on the reservation, Erdrich argues. “Tribal judges know they must make impeccable decisions. They know that they are being watched closely....Our courts and lawyers cherish every tool given by Congress. Nobody wants to blow it by convicting a non-Indian without overwhelming, unshakable evidence” (“Rape”). What this op-ed illuminates is that the fears described in *Father Meme* are continuing today—fear that the system will not work for you because you are Native or because you happen to live on a reservation and fear that there are institutions in place which are inadequate to meeting their purposes of protecting and serving their citizens.

The narrator of *Father Meme* cites *The Vows of Silence*, a book of investigative reporting on the relationship between the Vatican and child molesters, to support his claims that it is a deliberate practice to send clergy implicated in cases of child sexual abuse to reservations where cases are less likely to be reported, investigated, and prosecuted (89-91). “Only some saints, demons, stray priests, certain spies, and presidents enjoy such aegis, patronage, and absolute immunity,” the narrator explains. “Surely you can appreciate that sacrifice was the only remedy” (89). The boy narrator and his friends try to terrorize the priest into leaving the reservation, concocting a scheme they call the “Fourteen Torments” in which they use a sniper rifle to shoot something close to, but not on the actual person of, the priest while he is sitting at home or in his fishing cabin, using his outhouse, preparing to drive to work, et cetera. After each

⁹ This is also, of course, one of the topics of her award winning book, *The Round House* in which a young boy sees murder as the only viable way to gain just retribution for his own mother’s rape.

shooting, carefully planned to not cause actual bodily harm to the priest, they erect a cross on the site of the shooting, harnessing the powers of both Western military assault and Christian symbolism in an attempt to frighten the priest away from themselves. Ultimately, though, the Fourteen Torments fail: “Father Meme was truly scared and distracted by the sniper, but he would never be shamed or burdened by guilt for his sexual perversions and depravity. He revealed no humor, no play or native sense of irony” (115).

This is when the boys decide to escalate their response. “Native visions and the natural reason of contraries, the enemy way, trickster stories, animal conversions, and transmutations create a sense of eternal presence. Contraries tease and cure the heart by humor and irony, but the penis predators wound memory....The absolutes of monotheism never were the natural sources of native reason and futurity” (116-17). The tools of the West, “the enemy way” will not work, is what they have essentially concluded, and that is when they lay their trap for the priest, surprising him in his ice-fishing hut and beating him repeatedly with lilac sticks before slowly drowning him in the fishing hole cut in the ice. The lilac sticks carry meaning for the narrator: the lilac grows on the reservation and the “wood is strong, resilient...a potent weapon” (53); he and his friends would use the wood to make slingshots in the days before their violence reached the height of murder (58).

That the narrator used murder as a tool for survivance is something he seems to regret; recounting the “narrative of the sacrifice,” he explains that he was, even at the time, “shamed by my own violence” (119). Yet it is clear that he is at a loss as to what else to do given his dire circumstances. As he puts it early in the novel, “there is no easy way...for altar boys to reveal the shame of their abuse by the priest” (68). Several times

throughout the early stages of the abuse, there are chances to reveal the crimes committed by the priest against the boys, but each time shame and a sense of indecorousness keep the abuse hidden. Speaking of an opportunity he had to reveal the abuse, the narrator explains that he did not seize the chance because “candor and sincerity were overcome by hesitation and manners” (70). Such comments, made in a deceptively off hand manner, parallel Vizenor’s indictments against manifest manners in his critical work. Manifest manners, remember, “are the course of dominance,” those actions and ideas that originate in a source of power and which are meant to regulate the behavior and spiritual well being of those without the same wealth of power (*Manifest* vii). Vizenor generally tends to speak of the pervasive influence and oppressive qualities of manifest manners vis-à-vis their roles in larger frameworks such as religion and politics, though he also attributes the spread of the disease of alcoholism to manifest manners (*Manifest* 29) as an illustration of the many ways in which that which seems polite and well intentioned (offering a person a drink or using the monetary value of a bottle of liquor to settle a debt or fulfill trade negotiations) often contains, somewhere just below the surface, the promise of malice and far-reaching harmful consequences.

The insidious ubiquity of dominance, victimry, and manifest manners is what the adult narrator of *Father Meme* is able to identify and engage with as an adult. The dominance of those manners instilled by a Christian upbringing, that fear of marring a pleasant dinner with new acquaintances with a tragic story of ongoing sexual abuse, prevented the child he once was from being able to work with the system which was put in place by the same institutions which allowed Father Meme to be present on the reservation despite his status as a sex offender. That method of practicing survivance

which urges the practitioner to use the tools of the enemy having also failed, the young narrator turns to tactics of war; this is, ultimately, how he becomes a warrior of survivance.

The brutal murder of the pederastic reservation priest is quite a different path to the practice of survivance when compared with the methods illustrated in *Chair of Tears*. What the warrior of survivance does, though, that is similar to what the practitioners of survivance do in, for example, Captain Shammer's graduate seminar, is harness the power of narrative to distance themselves from victimry, manifest manners, oppression, domination, and all of the other various and insidious evils which result when one culture asserts itself, through an individual or an institution, over another. Shammer's blank books seem to almost force his students to practice survivance because of their blankness: divorced as this blankness is from the dictates of others, the students confronting the empty pages are forced to provide their own narrative of their achievements of stray visions. They must write the practice of survivance for themselves. Likewise in *Father Meme*, the narrator uses his "narrative of sacrifice" (119) not to justify his violent actions but to expose an ugly situation for what it was (and continues to be) and to explain his role which is not the role of victim but of actor, commander of his own fate. Through conversation, the narrator is able to control the events which have happened to him, and the way we shall perceive the events which he caused to happen. This, ultimately, is what it means to practice survivance.

CHAPTER 4. CONCLUSION

I began my introduction, so many pages ago, citing the largeness of the Ojibwe population, in the United States and in Canada, and bemoaning the relative lack of Ojibwe literary critics as compared with the plethora of literary critics to be found amongst, for example, the Cherokee. Gerald Vizenor and David Treuer are the two most prominent Ojibwe literary critics writing today; both have contributed, as I've said, volumes of critical work along with their literary endeavors, and have both, in their own ways, heavily influenced the future of Ojibwe literature and the interpretation of Native literature more broadly. I have already discussed Vizenor's work in detail, but now I would like to turn to Treuer's literary criticism. My reasons for concluding with this discussion shall, I hope, become clear as the discussion progresses.

Treuer published *Native American Fiction: A User's Manual* in 2006. Padraig Kirwan describes the effect of the publication of this collection of essays, most of which deal with various issues pertaining to Native literature, as having "electrified discourse within American literary studies and the field of Native American writing" (72). Some critics, such as Werner Sollors, praised the revolutionary value of the text¹⁰ while others have bemoaned the criticisms made against esteemed authors Louise Erdrich and Leslie Marmon Silko that appear in "Smartberries," and others have objected to what they perceive to be a return to an outdated New Critical approach. It is true that Treuer does, at

¹⁰ From the back cover: "David Treuer's book is likely to become the manifesto of a new generation of Native American writers and critics and will be of interest to readers of literature everywhere."

times, come across as a person with an ax to grind, railing, for example, for several pages against Sherman Alexie's production of "cultural manuals" akin to the dishonestly published *Little Tree*¹¹ (165). *Native American Fiction* would, arguably, be a stronger and more welcoming text without the unnecessarily extensive airing of grievances against commercially successful Native authors, but to focus on these instances is to lose sight of the value of what Treuer has to say, much of which is, at the very least, interesting and potentially as revolutionary as Sollors claims.

In the book's final essay, "Some Final Thoughts about the Non-Existence of Native American Fiction," Treuer seems to take a step back from his earlier vitriol, taking his last chance to soften his message a bit. Throughout *Native American Fiction*, his fixation has primarily been on arguing that to read Native fiction as specifically Native fiction is to lose sight of the power of literature qua literature, to substitute searching for and appreciating good literature with a search for and appreciation of an ideal of Nateness. In his last essay, he succinctly summarizes this position, writing that "we should be free to construct narratives unchained from the projects of historicizing and pointing away, always away, from our cultural centers, and instead, claim the rights that other writers have enjoyed for centuries: to make larger the worlds of our prose through significant linguistic and cultural detail" (202).

Here, Treuer is making a nuanced claim that I believe few would quibble with. Literary narratives which describe and engage with cultural landscapes—i.e. pretty much

¹¹ Treuer labels as "cultural manuals" books which seem to him to be "novels of education" in which "the person being educated is not the main character. It is the reader" (164). What, to use Treuer's example, makes both Alexie's work and *Little Tree* "cultural manuals" is that both seem to be gratuitously explaining aspects of Native culture which the Native characters would already know or don't need to have explained to them in order for them to expand as characters or for the plot to develop.

every literary narrative—are not successful when they point and scream to call attention to their cultural relevancy, no matter what culture is at hand. Or, if they do manage to be successful by some rubric of success, it is in spite of these didactic theatrics and not because of them. Instead of constructing stories around cultural details, Treuer suggests, a successful Native novelist—a successful novelist of any background—ought to incorporate details of actual contemporary or historical Native life in such a way that the details complement and add depth to the story rather than serve as the story’s foundation. Treuer comes close to arguing that when cultural details become the tapestry onto which the plot and characters are woven, issues of authorial authenticity can fade away. This is because, he hints, the authenticity of the details (that is, the authenticity of the portrayals of culturally significant beliefs, objects, histories, events, et cetera) will be measured by how well they work with and enhance other aspects of the narrative (190). In other words, questions of authenticity do not have to have the author of the text as their subjects; questions of authenticity can and should have the text itself as the sole subject.

Treuer advances many versions of this argument throughout the essays which compose *Native American Fiction*. It is his push for writing to be evaluated on its internal cohesiveness, rather than within a broader framework such as race studies, that has earned him the quasi-derisive label of New Critic. It seems, though, that Treuer is, rather than ascribing wholeheartedly to a return of New Criticism, reacting against essentialist accounts of what Native literature can and should be. Treuer seems to be frustrated by the idea that the inclusion of a smattering of phrases in Native languages, whether it be Ojibwemowin or Navajo (“Smartberries”) or the invocation of stock Native images such as “the cold wind that blows across the mesa” (188) is enough to qualify a novel or

poem or short story as having in some way authentically communicated a truth about Native subjectivities and realities.

I do not think, though, that a labeling of Treuer's theoretical stance as New Critical is quite fair. The "Author's Note" which opens *Native American Fiction* does heavily suggest a New Critical stance when it declares that "by applying ourselves to the word, and, at least at the outset of our endeavors, by ignoring the identity of the author and all the ways the author constructs his or her authority outside the text, we will be better able to ascertain the true value of that text" (3). The key words here, though, are "at least at the outset of our endeavors." Treuer does not propose the limits on interpretation that New Critics, by definition, demand. Neither does he wish to ignore completely the complex politics of canon formation or the advancements made by scholars in Native literary studies. More than anything, Treuer seems to be reacting to the popular fetishization of Native culture, evidenced by the popularity of movies such as *Dances with Wolves*. Treuer is reacting with anger and a passion for literature qua *literature*, and he is writing against the accolades won by fiction which parades its Nateness at the expense of sincere literary development. What's good, interesting, moving, engaging, relevant, important, and, ultimately, worth paying attention to in Native culture and literature would, or should, be all of those things even without the attached "Native" label.

In light of this argument, what value, then, does my cultural reading of Erdrich's and Vizenor's works bring to the study of Native literature or to literature more broadly? Do I do a disservice to the remarkable mastery of craft demonstrated within the pages of *The Painted Drum* when I connect its structure to the history and conventions of oral storytelling among the traditional Ojibwe? Do I run the risk of forcing Vizenor's *Father*

Meme into the role of “cultural manual” when I read it through the framework of survivance and seek to connect this underlying belief system to issues faced by the Native community at large? Of course, it would be easy to ignore Treuer’s arguments, and certainly possible given the criticisms against his work spurred by his occasional lack of tact. However, his fears that the substance of Native literature can and often does become lost in readers’ preoccupation with cultural details grasped at separately from the narrative as a whole, seem to me to be valid fears worth addressing.

It is important that readers do not allow a concern with getting the cultural details “right” to interfere with the reading process; this is true of all literature, of course. But it is also true that people read fiction often to find out about the lives of other people, to experience events and emotions and belief systems different from those with which the reader typically engages in her own life. Sometimes, yes, readers are reading purely out of an appreciation for style and characterization, but just as it would be false to say that a book cannot portray captivatingly a unique experience *and* be well and originally written, it would be false to say that readers cannot learn about unique cultures and perspectives *while* appreciating the literary value of the text being read. What readers pay attention to most while reading is a complicated function of who that reader is, why that reader is reading a particular text at a particular time, the communities of which that reader is a member, what knowledge the reader is able to bring to the text before she even begins reading, and so on. This is true of all texts including Native literature.

While writing, I have had in mind non-Ojibwe readers whose appreciation of Ojibwe novels could be enhanced by a wider range of knowledge of Ojibwe culture and literary history than they may have had previously. It is my belief that the more cultural

background knowledge a reader is able to bring to bear on a text, especially a text which deals with a culture perhaps to some degree foreign to the reader, the richer that reader's experience of the text will be. The more she knows going in, the more deeply she will be able to engage with and offer alternative interpretations of the text. Cultural background knowledge ought not to be recollected solely, as Treuer seems to worry that it would be, to judge the authenticity and thus the critical value of the text or the author. Rather, cultural background knowledge should serve to enhance the reader's abilities to make judgments about the value of the text as a piece of literary craftsmanship and as an example of life.

As a final brief example of how cultural background knowledge can influence and enrich readers' appreciation of a text, I would like now to turn to Treuer's own first novel, *Little* (1995). Kirwan credits Treuer's novel *Little* with sparking a popular interest in Ojibwe literature (72), and indeed the book garnered much critical acclaim and merited glowing blurbs from none other than Louise Erdrich and Toni Morrison. *Little* tells the story of an extended family—family which includes close friends who are not strictly relatives—struggling to understand each other before and after the mysterious death of a young child they call Little. The novel is, like the two which have followed it, beautifully written, and its complexity is handled with care and an expert attention to detail.

In his essay on *Little*, David Stirrup nicely expresses the struggle a reader might have in deciding whether or not to attempt a cultural reading of Treuer's work given Treuer's adamant disavowal of such readings. It is hard, Stirrup argues, to avoid a cultural reading, "especially where the artist's 'artistry' is informed by his or her cultural background, the expressive traditions of which may differ ostensibly from the Western

literary tradition into which the text...is ultimately placed” (652). Throughout his article, Stirrup draws connections between the experiences and scenes described in *Little* and the larger themes of Native literature they parallel, casting Little as a trickster figure (663) and commenting on the ways Ojibwe and western Christian belief systems intersect within Little (666). It is a fascinating reading of *Little* of which Treuer would surely approve: Stirrup concludes that the literary merit of the novel lies in its ambiguity which is a factor of both the expert handling of style demonstrated by Treuer and the subtle ways in which Treuer both explicitly and implicitly puts into collision the two cultures of which he and his characters are parts. Thus is illustrated the value of the sort of cultural reading which Treuer decries.

In the final paragraph of his analysis of *Little*, Stirrup tackles Treuer’s decision to have the character Little referred to as such throughout the novel. Little has a “real” name, Little Stan, intended to honor his presumed father, but that is not the moniker by which anyone ever refers to him. Stirrup reads this through the lens of Vizenor’s theorizing about contemporary trickster figures and concludes that Little is “a picaro, he ‘is not a presence or a real person but a semiotic sign in a language game,’ a focal point of dialog between author, narrator, characters, and audience....the poetic figure transcending the prosaic” (668). This is a delightfully elegant reading of Little’s name, one that is evocative of Ludwig Wittgenstein and Roland Barthes, Western theorists of language and style; Stirrup’s reading is, in other words, one that gives primacy to the literary qualities Treuer himself seems to most value in his own literary criticism.

What Stirrup does not take into account in his reading of Treuer’s novel are the sorts of pieces of cultural background knowledge that are specific to the Ojibwe that I

have been discussing throughout this writing. Like most worthwhile critics of Native work, he is very careful to draw on the work of Native scholars when such work is available and appropriate (for example, his use of an Ojibwe theorist, Vizenor, to interpret a novel by an Ojibwe about an Ojibwe community). However, Stirrup's reading commits the error of equating one specific Native nation with the whole of the Native community. Beliefs, rituals, traditions, and histories specific to the Ojibwe are largely ignored in favor of a discussion of those familiarly Native themes: poverty, life on the reservation, and the influence of Christianity, to name just a few.

Earlier, I discussed at length the use of naming in Erdrich's work, drawing heavily on the theory of Vizenor to do so. I would like to return briefly to that discussion, applying it now to Treuer's *Little*, to highlight the paths that could be opened up by the addition of even a small bit of Ojibwe-specific background cultural knowledge to a reading of this novel by an author who does not believe, in his life as a critic, that such background knowledge is strictly necessary. I do not, by any means, wish to negate the value of readings such as Stirrup's or interpretive lenses such as Treuer's; merely, I wish to see what little light may be shed by added in a small piece of cultural background knowledge to such readings.

Little has a "proper" Western name: Little Stan. "Little" serves in this case as a subversion of the "junior" suffix which would normally be used to denote that his name has been chosen to honor and link him to another adult in his community, the Stan who is supposed to have fathered him. Remember that in traditional Ojibwe culture, formal names confer protective power while nicknames are important because they subvert the power of white Christian society and connect the bearer of the nickname to the

community which has bestowed the nickname. As we saw in the earlier discussion of Erdrich's novels, the possession of a carefully chosen nickname does serve to set the nickname's owner apart, to protect them, even if just a little bit, from the harsher realities of racism, hunger, and other forms of deprivation. In Little's case, however, he lacks a proper name which is truly his own, and his nickname does not appear to have been carefully chosen: it is merely a shortening, a slightly subverted take on the western naming suffix "junior."

In other words, Little's odds of a long and happy life are lowered from its start. We learn on the very first page that Little's fate is a bad one: the novel's opening reads "the grave we dug for my brother Little remained empty even after we filled it back in. And nobody was going to admit it" (3). Further down the first page, the reader is informed that "Little's hands had been deformed since birth, his fingers fused into huge claws, three clubby fingers on each hand" (3). This deformity further links him with the man to whom his mother has assigned fatherhood, Stan, because Stan also has a congenital deformity which, after a war accident, has left him, too, with a total of six fingers. Since Stan is not Little's actual father, though, the reader realizes that both Little's "proper" name and his nickname carry tinges of dishonesty. Not only have traditional naming ceremonies been foregone, but also his mother has named him with the same careless deceit with which he is buried (or, rather, not buried).

Stan's actual father, it is implied, is either one of two twins, Duke and Ellis, family friends who live a more "traditional" Ojibwe lifestyle on the reservation. They didn't speak English when they were young, and "got [their] English name[s], being they didn't speak any English except for the little bit [they] picked up from loggers" (55)

while working in a logging camp populated by English speakers. Ellis, we are told, is named for Ellis Island because of his reticence which the loggers apparently connect with an immigrant background (55). Duke is called after the brand of rolling tobacco he favors (55). The implication is that the nicknames by which Duke and Ellis are referred to throughout the book were purposefully chosen and have meaning, even if white men were the ones doing the choosing. These nicknames protect Duke and Ellis, it is also implied, from more ruthless and less inclusive forms of racism among their white counterparts. Their nicknames in conjunction with their Ojibwemowin names, we learn shortly after this revelation, may have had a part in protecting them from the smallpox outbreak which killed their entire families (56). Essentially, Duke and Ellis have lived long, relatively happy lives with which they seem throughout the novel to be content, and it is hard not to wonder if their adherence to traditional Ojibwe ways, obliquely suggested through Treuer's hints about their names, is to some extent responsible.

Such a reading of the differences in opportunity for the characters in *Little*, the different chances they have for longevity and for happiness and, too, for the successful practice of survivance, is possible only when the reader understands the cultural background knowledge pertaining to naming practices in traditional and contemporary Ojibwe culture. The brief reading I have done above is not a complete argument, of course; rather, it is meant to show how the reader's experience changes when she possesses some of this background knowledge. The decision to call Little "Little" is not just a sadly poignant reflection of the tangled state of affairs in this tight-knit but damaged community, as one might think, and Duke's story of how he and Ellis came to be called Duke and Ellis is not just filler meant to give the reader a sense of what the

twins have been up to their whole lives, and it is not *just* a commentary on a small incident in which white and Native cultures collided and tried to make sense of each other.

My goal in writing has been to highlight the need for readers of Ojibwe literature to familiarize themselves with Ojibwe culture separately from the cultural knowledge communicated in the novels themselves. Through my examples, I hope I have been able to demonstrate some sense of the range of interpretations which are opened up through having such knowledge in one's toolbox as a reader of these novels. In all novels, the experienced reader must recognize that a name is not always just a name and a story is not always just a story. The reader must draw on contextual clues and her background knowledge of the way the world in which the narrative is set works. When that world is a world different from the reader's own, the reader has a responsibility, if she wishes to read as deeply as possible into the text she is engaging with, to learn as much about that world as she can. Through this process, she will emerge a better reader and the books will, often, emerge as better books, containing more than may immediately meet the inexperienced eye.

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